
A CASTLE TO LET

MRS. BAILLIE REYNOLDS

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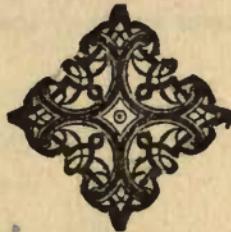
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A Castle To Let

By MRS. BAILLIE REYNOLDS

AUTHOR OF

“The Daughter Pays,” “The Lonely Stronghold”
“The King’s Widow,” etc.



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CHAPTER I

HER OWN MISTRESS

SOUTH KENSINGTON may perhaps be described as pre-eminently the home of the British domesticities. All that most indicates the rectitude, the stability, the refinement of English family life at its best flourishes here, where we have neither the oppressive wealth of Belgravia nor the mediocrity of the suburbs.

Had you opened the street door of Number 3 Truro Gardens, one evening in the late June of the year before the war, you would have been greeted by that mingled odour of clear soup, green peas, hot fruit, and stuffing, which indicates that a dinner-party is in progress.

The hall of the house was spacious, as halls in London go. It was tiled with coloured encaustics, and dadoed with some kind of papier mâché which, when painted dark brown, was supposed to resemble oak panelling. Above this, the wallpaper was of a rather violent shade of what used to be called peacock blue.

Engravings after Alma Tadema, Sant, and even Edwin Long loudly gave out the date at which this hall had been furnished.

Men-servants and maid-servants were scurrying to and fro, and from the dining-room came a subdued hum of decorous talk and properly moderated laughter.

The iced pudding had just been carried out, and the butler was entrusting to a colleague, hired for the occa-

sion, a dish of tempting prawn savouries—with a face imbued with the solemnity befitting such an important festival. He himself excelled as an entertainer, and he was looking forward to the moment, an hour later, when he would take his place at the table in the servants' hall and press some of his young mistress's champagne upon the hired waiter's willing acceptance. Forbes looked forward to a series of such dinners as the present one—with perhaps a somewhat gayer company, for choice, than the one now assembled—in the future, which stretched before him in rosy colours, since his young mistress was celebrating ~~her coming~~ of age to-night.

She sat at the head of her table in a dining-room which was an echo of the hall. The sideboard had been bought in the Tottenham Court Road thirty years previously, and was of walnut, with an overmantel and suite to correspond.

On the long wall opposite the fireplace hung two oil-paintings in heavy gold frames. They represented a middle-aged man, who still clung to the short, straight side-whiskers of the 'eighties, and a youngish woman, in dowdy evening dress, with a gold locket and chain.

Their faces were both pleasing rather than otherwise: the man in particular had what one might call an interesting face, an expression which suggested possibilities. His mouth was sensitive as well as firm. One felt that both had been people with a strong sense of duty, and not without culture.

Their orphan daughter sat beneath their portraits, gravely fronting the relatives who graced her board that night.

George France was a man who succeeded comparatively late in life. His success—at the bar—came to him quite suddenly and unexpectedly. There had not seemed a chance that his long engagement would ever crystallise

into matrimony, and then, as the result of one cleverly defended case, he had more work than he could cope with.

At the time they married, his wife, who had been waiting for him eight years, was thirty years old. She was not a strong woman, and some physical defect was found to exist, which made the doctors think it impossible that she should ever be the mother of a living child.

Five or six times her hopes of motherhood were disappointed, and then she was taken to see a new specialist of great ability. The result was her daughter Camiola, now seated pensive under the distressingly philistine presentment of the mother who had only lived to rejoice in her for seven years.

Camiola's life had run in sevens, for when she was fourteen her father succumbed to a sudden attack of pneumonia following influenza. He died a fairly wealthy man, and soon after his death his wife's only sister, rich and childless, died also, and left the bulk of a large fortune to Camiola.

Mrs. France's brother, John Thurlow, a solicitor, had been appointed guardian of the orphan, in conjunction with Arnold Bassett, a barrister whose friendship with George France dated from boyhood.

To-night Mr. Thurlow sat upon his niece's right hand, and Mr. Bassett upon her left. Next to Mr. Bassett was Mrs. Thurlow, and as there was not a Mrs. Bassett, Mr. Thurlow had for neighbour a young girl of Hungarian extraction, a college friend of Camiola. Next to this young lady sat Neville Thurlow, eldest son of John, and Camiola's cousin. Next to him again was a maiden cousin called Ellen Brocklebank, who always had to be asked to family gatherings. Another married couple, slightly related, Archer by name, and the elder Miss Thurlow completed the assembly, with the exception of the vicar of the parish who had baptised Miss France in infancy, as he

was fond of telling her; and Miss Purdon, the lady who had taken care of her for some years, and who sat facing her, at the table's foot.

The savoury had been dealt with and carried away, and Forbes and his assistants now deftly removed things from the table, and then, standing at either end, raised the long lace-bordered strips of embroidered linen and left the glossy mahogany bare, in all the beauty of its wine-deep polish. This was the only innovation upon which the young mistress had insisted, and she could hear Aunt Thurlow's sniff of contemptuous disapproval. Aunt Thurlow did not love her niece by marriage. She thought it very unjust that Aunt Meadow's money should go in such great measure to a girl who already had quite enough to make her an object for fortune-hunters. However, she curbed her displeasure, because she thought it most probable that Camiola would marry Neville, her son. When once the young lady was her daughter-in-law, and the money safely in the family, she promised herself some plain speaking.

The decanters had been circulated, the fruit handed, and now Uncle Thurlow was rising to his feet. He was a stout man, and after eating a large dinner he breathed somewhat noisily. He was at no time a fluent speaker, and the fact of having jotted down one or two things he intended to say seemed to have the effect of almost paralysing his eloquence. He hummed and hawed over his good wishes until every one present yearned for the moment of his sitting down, and his son Neville sat with the face of an early Christian martyr listening to the mixture of sentiment and business which came in some confusion and after long intervals from the paternal lips.

The one thing which emerged most clearly from the welter was the fact that the speaker thought it a pity that George France's will made his daughter completely

her own mistress at the age of twenty-one. He hoped, however, that the guardianship of himself and "my good friend Bassett here" had been of so lenient and agreeable a description that the young lady would be drawn to consult them from time to time before taking any definite or decisive step. In conclusion, he wanted to say what pleasure it gave him to see his dear dead sister's child who—he said it without avuncular partiality—had grown up a most attractive girl, settled so comfortably in her handsome house, in the midst of a small but most affectionate circle of relatives and under the care of a lady whose attachment to her was so real and whose personal character so exemplary, as he could safely affirm Miss Purdon's to be.

He sat down, and everybody applauded, with a feeling that they were atoning for their boredom and their impatience by these false marks of esteem.

Arnold Bassett leaned back in his chair with a fine smile of disdain. Then he turned to the heroine of the evening, who was gazing reflectively into her finger-bowl, and seemed a little absent-minded.

"Shall I thank them on your behalf?" he asked. "Anything particular you would like me to say?"

"You are very kind," replied Camiola, "but I will do my own talking, I think."

Slowly she rose to her feet, and stood before them—a slim girl who appeared taller than she really was, a pale girl with black hair, and curious, inscrutable eyes, which were green when you looked closely at them. Her features were decidedly good, but her expression was of reserve, and, as Aunt Thurlow said, "You never knew how to take Camiola."

Her white dress was very simple, and her only ornament a diamond and pearl pendant which hung from a slender gold chain.

There was no hesitation in her clear voice, which carried, without effort, to the admiring servants outside the door in the hall.

"I thank you all for the kindness with which you have drunk my health," she said. "I have to thank particularly my Uncle John and Mr. Bassett for the wholly satisfactory way in which they have carried out their duty of guardians—a duty full of difficulty and involving much trouble. I was specially glad when Uncle John, three years ago, yielded to my wish, allowed me to shut up this house, and to go to Oxford. I am sure that my education has made me better fitted to face the future and take charge of my own fortune. It is with the greatest pleasure that I welcome you all here this evening, though the pleasure is mingled with some regret at the thought that I shall never have the pleasure of seeing you here again. The first act of my new reign is to be the sale of this house and a great deal of the furniture in it, and my departure from England for a time. I am going to have a *Wander Jahr*. I think such an experience will be useful to me, because when I come back I intend to buy a place in the country and try and do some good among my fellow-creatures. I expect to start in about six weeks' time, taking with me Miss Purdon, if she will come; and I should not be surprised if we go round the world. In thanking you for drinking my health, I wish to propose that of my two guardians, Uncle John and Mr. Bassett, and to couple this toast with the name of the celebrated K.C., Mr. Arnold Bassett."

She sat down. For a moment her guardians were so amazed that there was a portentous silence. Then the vicar, with a start, rose to his feet, and led the hearty honouring of the toast of the two guardians.

The eminent K.C., when he rose to reply, seemed to have had the wind taken out of his sails. He owned that

the announcement of his late ward's intentions had been a blow. He felt a personal regret at the thought that this hospitable board, at which in the lifetime of his dear friend George France he had so often sat, would know him no more. No. 3 Truro Gardens had stood for him, for many years, for the home of a friend. It was to be given up. Well—as we all know—we are growing old, and “the younger generation is knocking at the door.” He should have thought, in his ignorance—the mere man, a back number, as he knew himself to be—he would have thought that a young lady who had just inherited such a sumptuous fortune would have been more inclined to try a London season than to go round the world. However, nobody could question Miss France's right to do exactly as she chose, and he would ask them all to join in drinking most heartily with him another toast—“*Success to the Wander Jahr!*”

Mrs. Thurlow sat staring upon him with keen little eyes which had a rather vindictive expression. Slowly she turned to the vicar, who was her neighbour, and asked, “What is a Vanderyar? I never heard of one.”

The vicar explained. “German is such a horrid language,” remarked the lady; “I never would learn it. I suppose Camiola has caught it from that foreign girl sitting opposite to us. I am told that she is not German really, but Hungarian, and that her native language is even more barbarous than German; but the Austrians speak German, don't they? She was sent to Oxford, you know—such an odd idea. What does a foreigner want with Oxford? The Universities seem full of odd people nowadays; I am glad we never sent our girls there! It has filled my niece's head with the most ridiculous ideas. You would think with two cousins so near her own age as Phyllis and Betty she would not need to make a friend

of a *Hungarian*. However, *shakker narson goo*. I do speak French a little, but German——”

“A difficult language. I have sometimes wished I were more expert, since the German theologians are of such importance,” replied the vicar mildly.

“German theologians!” Mrs. Thurlow withered him with all the scorn of ignorance. “I should think our English theologians were enough for your parishioners.”

“Rather too much, I sometimes think,” he replied, in full security that the lady would not understand him.

“How long has Camiola been hatching this idea of selling her house and going abroad?” asked Neville Thurlow of the girl next him—Fräulein Maldovan, the young Hungarian.

“Oh, not so very long,” replied she, “though we have often talked about it. You see, until our schools were over, we had not much time to think about other things. Was she not wonderful to do it all in three years?”

“Oh, well,” said Neville with an air of condescension, “in my day we thought three years quite enough for a pass, you know.”

“You read for honours?” inquired she, with a pretty air of deference. He assented, with a smile of gentle superiority, and did not add that his class was a third one only.

“Why didn’t Camiola read for honours?” he asked.

“She wanted to, but Miss Purdon dissuaded her. She thought there was no particular object in it, I think.”

“Sensible woman,” replied Neville approvingly. “I suppose that is one thing we are all agreed upon—Miss Purdon is the right woman in the right place. Camiola can’t go very far wrong in her care.”

“Oh, certainly,” replied Irmgard Maldovan.

She was very unlike her friend, for she was a blonde, a thing most unusual among Hungarians. Her eyes were

a soft brown, contrasting strangely with her fair hair. Her features were not regular, but she had the Honvèd vividness and charm. The fashionable style of hairdressing suited her, and she wore a fillet of turquoise and silver which would have delighted the soul of an artist.

She was feeling sorry for Neville Thurlow, and he would have had something like a shock had he realised how far she saw into the depths of his being. He had been entertaining her charmingly all dinner-time, and had been full of plans for the summer vacation. She had not dared to discount Camiola's forthcoming announcement by telling him that his plans were foredoomed.

His mother was as completely upset as he was. She arose and followed the young hostess when she gave the signal in a mood which boded ill for somebody.

In the hall her daughter Phyllis managed to give her a hint.

"Mother, whatever happens, don't be fool enough to offend Camiola," she whispered. "Remember, she is perfectly independent, and if you upset her you will be cutting off your nose to spite your face."

"What could have put this into her head?" muttered the irate lady. "Neville's chance is over—completely over! She is certain to be snapped up before she ever sees England again."

"Of course. But you can't help it. We are her nearest kin, and she may be shipwrecked or killed or take enteric or something before she comes home. Remember, she is not married yet, and we are her natural heirs at present."

The young Thurlows were a good deal older than their cousin, though Mrs. Thurlow had spoken of her girls as "companions of Camiola's own age." Neville was thirty-one, and his sister only two years younger. Camiola's memories of her cousins when she was a child were not happy. They had ordered her about and been intolerant

of her youth and inexperience. Her father had left instructions for her to receive an education of a kind which Mr. Thurlow thought unfitting for a girl; and respecting this Phyllis and Betty had been contemptuous.

The daughter's timely warning did, however, prevent Mrs. Thurlow from making herself openly objectionable. She bore as best she could with Cousin Ellen Brocklebank's raptures of admiration of dearest Camiola.

Poor Cousin Ellen! She was of those who are filled with a great desire to help all the world, and a total incapacity to do the simplest thing sensibly. No doubt her parents were more to blame than she herself. Early training might have corrected the hopeless untidiness, the lamentable want of method, the injudicious impulses which brought to naught all her eager benevolence.

She was a perfectly sincere creature, her "gush" was natural and not assumed. Camiola often wished she could take her in hand and give her a course of lessons in neatness. She wore to-night a gown of some sickly tint of pale mauve. Why do people with string-coloured hair and complexion invariably desire to wear pale mauve? The garment looked as though she had last worn it about four seasons previously, and had, in taking it off, screwed it together and bundled it into the corner of a room never swept, where it had remained until she picked it up to wear this evening. Her boiled-gooseberry eyes were, however, alight with a joy and pride in her charming and fortunate young kinswoman which was beautiful, if you consider that she herself was poor and plain, and spent her days in attendance upon a mother who suffered from nerves.

"Such a charming plan—to travel!" she cried. "Everything nowadays made so easy for you! How I wish I were coming with you!"

Camiola felt a sudden pang of compunction. This poor

Cousin Ellen, who hardly ever got an "evening off" such as she was having to-night!

She said something regretful, trying not to be insincere. Cousin Ellen laughed quite cheerily. "I can say I wish I were coming without being thought to be giving hints," she replied, beaming, "because, you see, even if you invited me, begged me, implored me to come, it would be out of the question that I should leave mamma."

Camiola felt a rush of compassion. "Ellen, you *are* a brick," she cried impulsively. "I wish I could give you a holiday! Do you think Cousin Sophie would go to the Riviera for the winter if I gave you the money to pay for it?"

Ellen started and coloured. "Oh, Camiola, please," she murmured, "I do assure you that I was not hinting—you make me feel so awkward."

But Camiola gripped the skinny arm and hurried Cousin Ellen into the back drawing-room. "My money is my own, and I can do as I like," she urged defiantly. "If I like to think that you are having a good time while I am away—if it will make me happier to think I am giving somebody else a bit of pleasure—why, you couldn't be so nasty as to deprive me of my satisfaction!"

CHAPTER II

A CHANGE OF PLAN

IRMGARD MALDOVAN had gone to the piano and was softly romancing in the background. While Cousin Ellen and Camiola argued, Mrs. Thurlow sat down beside Miss Purdon on the settee and asked somewhat frigidly:

“And what do you think, my dear Miss Purdon, of this plan of my niece’s?”

Miss Purdon looked up from the knitting that hardly ever left her beautiful hands. She was a majestic woman, with abundant hair, quite grey, and a delicate complexion which contradicted her autumn looks. Her eyes were Irish—grey and shadowy—and she was, altogether, both handsome and charming. “A most distinguished woman” was what everybody said of her. She smiled at Mrs. Thurlow with a sympathetic glance while she replied:

“I think it’s most natural, don’t you?”

“Natural? No, since you ask me, I don’t. Of course, she would go away for the present. She might even stay at the sea or in Scotland until October or November. But to sell this house, where her father brought her mother as a bride——”

Miss Purdon glanced round the drawing-room, which had been furnished during the ebonised-and-gold craze. “I am afraid I don’t think there is much to inspire sentimental attachment in the houses in Truro Gardens,” she replied.

Mrs. Thurlow was impressed. Herself very much of the middle classes, she had an enormous respect for the

opinions of Miss Purdon, who was cousin of an impoverished Irish peer.

“Well,” she admitted reluctantly, “of course my niece is really a great heiress.”

“I was surprised to know how wealthy she is,” answered Miss Purdon.

“Her guardians have nursed her property well,” said Mrs. Thurlow with pardonable triumph. “I only trust she won’t destroy the labours of years in a few months.”

“Camiola has some sense and some ambition,” replied Miss Purdon, knitting swiftly. “She is perhaps quixotic, but she is no fool.”

“And she has you to advise her,” gushed Mrs. Thurlow. “Oh, do try and prevent her marrying a fortune-hunter!”

“That”—with a little smile—“is the penalty to be suffered by heiresses.”

“It would break Neville’s heart,” said Neville’s mother in a low voice.

“Has he told her so?” asked the other lady.

Mrs. Thurlow heaved a sigh. “Not yet. He thought he ought to wait to speak until she was her own mistress.”

“I am afraid, then, that he had better hold his tongue until this foreign tour is over,” advised Miss Purdon. “Camiola is thinking of nothing less than of marriage just at present.”

“But she is sure to be snapped up by the time she returns,” gasped Mrs. Thurlow, speaking out in her despair.

Miss Purdon laid down the knitting completely, and spoke as one who makes a confidence.

“I believe that Camiola, though she will leave England at once, means to stay in Europe till the end of September. I think of suggesting to Mr. Bassett that he should join our party some time during the long vacation. How if Mr. Neville came too?”

Mrs. Thurlow’s eye lit up. “That is an idea,” she

slowly said. "I do feel that those two ought to marry."

"You have no prejudice against the marriage of first cousins?"

"Circumstances alter cases," primly observed the lady. "The family health is excellent on both sides."

There was no reply. The flashing needles were again busy.

"I suppose"—with carefully lowered voice—"you have no knowledge of the state of Camiola's affections? You don't think she cares for Neville?"

"My own opinion is that she is wholly fancy free; but I never try to probe her confidence. Irmgard could probably tell you more of her feelings than I can."

"Yes, that girl! A foreigner! And she is to be taken round the world, when Phyllis and Betty are both dying to go! Why should Camiola take a Hungarian girl, of all nationalities, about with her?"

"Why should not Camiola take whom she likes?" The question was rather coldly put. Mrs. Thurlow stared. She admired Miss Purdon, and Miss Purdon was always very civil to her; but it did now occur to her to reflect that Miss Purdon could have no interests to serve in serving those of Mrs. Thurlow.

"Your daughters are neither of them Camiola's contemporaries," went on the cool, clear voice. "She is much attached to Fräulein Maldovan, who has been her close friend at Oxford during two years."

"Who is the girl?" asked Mrs. Thurlow fretfully.

"She is the daughter of General Maldovan, who commands a division of the Austrian army in a very out-of-the-way spot—Transylvania."

"Transylvania? What has the Austrian army to do there? It is in the United States, is it not?"

Miss Purdon repressed her smile. "It is on the east of Hungary, and Irmgard's father commands the forces

of a large district, the Ildenthal, which seems to be in the mountains, leagues from civilisation."

"H'm! A General, and governs a province! I suppose my niece thinks she would like to enter the aristocracy," remarked Mrs. Thurlow spitefully.

"She certainly has the means to marry well if she choose to look high," was the tranquil rejoinder. "She is attractive, too, though a little shy at present; and, as I told you, I think she is ambitious."

So saying, Miss Purdon rose and crossed the room to talk to Mrs. Archer. She was thoroughly conversant with the duties of her position. Mrs. Thurlow sat where she was, sunk in reverie, wondering what she could do, how to establish over Miss Purdon some hold which might induce her to work the oracle.

Later, when the gentlemen came upstairs, she thought she understood. Arnold Bassett was the first to come, and he gravitated to the chaperon's side.

Miss Purdon, while abating no jot of her dignified self-possession, was nevertheless exceedingly cordial; and Mrs. Thurlow was not long in concluding that the lady, foreseeing the marriage of her charge in a year or two's time, was manœuvring for a home of her own.

As she said to her husband that night when going to bed, nobody but herself could have divined the little secret. She had always thought of Bassett as a husband for Phyllis, but as he had dined constantly at their house for the last eight years and nothing had come of it, she had reached the conclusion that it would be best to surrender that idea, and do what she could to bring Arnold and Miss Purdon together, if only Miss Purdon, in return, would promote Neville's interest.

"If Neville is such a blamed ass that he can't do his own courting, he won't get far even with Miss Purdon to push him," remarked Mr. Thurlow. "Nev's got no emo-

tions. He's nothing but a stomach and an intelligence. The first man who has the sentiments will chip in and leave him badly beaten."

This, his wife told him, was just like a man. They little knew how much is done by indirect influence—by the constant pressure of a strong will acting upon a young and ardent nature.

"Is Camiola ardent? I should have thought her as cold as Nev," was the answer. "At his age I should have preferred something more juicy. But, of course, her fortune is worth giving up a good bit for."

At Number 3 Camiola saw the door close upon the last of her guests—Mr. Arnold Bassett—without a regret.

She was her own mistress at last. She had, so she hoped, kissed both Uncle John and Uncle Arnold, as she called him, though he was nothing of the kind, for the last time. "To-morrow," she cried joyfully, as she caught Irmgard in her arms and hugged her, "we will go and put this house in the auctioneer's hands, and the day after we will fly to Cook's and take tickets to go round the world!"

The first part of this intoxicating programme was duly carried out next day. They went to the auctioneer's and gave full directions for the warehousing of some bits of furniture which were treasures, and the sale of all the rest. The men were to come in and pack next Monday, and the old and trusted servants, such as Forbes, were to be sent into the country on board wages until such time as their young mistress should have a use for them once more.

The following morning, however, brought a check to the eager progress of Camiola. There was a letter for Irmgard upon the breakfast table, and it brought bad news. Her mother was ill, so seriously ill that her daughter's presence was absolutely necessary, and, should the crisis

pass and her life be prolonged, her father feared that Irmgard would have to be at home at least for some months to come, since her mother must of necessity be an invalid for a considerable period.

This was a blow.

Permission for Irmgard to accompany her friend round the world had been received from Ildestadt only with difficulty. Now all was overthrown. The well-laid plans were useless. To go voyaging without her friend would be no pleasure to Camiola. She felt inclined to cancel all orders and sit at home in Truro Gardens sulking.

Both the girls shed tears as they sat together in a somewhat dark morning-room, whose window was so overshadowed by projecting walls of mud-coloured brick that it had to be made of cathedral glass to exclude the hideous prospect. It was hardly to be wondered at that the mistress of the house wanted to go elsewhere.

Miserably Camiola turned over the leaves of a continental time-table.

"I never saw such a place as Ildestadt," she muttered; "the man who compiled this book has apparently not yet discovered it."

"Only about two trains a day," sighed Irmgard, busily sewing buttons on her gloves. "It will be poked away in a corner—Ildenthal branch of the Hungarian States Railway."

She looked very woebegone. Her mother's illness was a real grief, for she feared her father considerably more than she loved him. Her first thought was for the sick woman, for her heart was simple and full of family affection; but mingled with it was a big dose of sorrow for herself, suddenly deprived of what was to have been the kind of treat you only read of in the "Arabian Nights." She might have known, she supposed, that it was too good to come true. Was it likely that she, Irmgard Mal-

dovan, would ever go round the world? When her old uncle, the Admiral, had given her father the money to send her to England to complete her education, that had seemed too good to be true. Then the unbelievable beauty of Oxford, the delight of making friends with so exceptional a girl as Camiola, the prospect of such pleasure as was to be hers in the projected travels—it all seemed part of an incredible dream, from which she was now awakened.

She found herself faced by the prospect of returning to Szass Lona, her father's present home, to a solitude, an isolation not to be conceived of by an English mind.

In Transylvania the aristocracy alone is Magyar, and lives surrounded by a middle-class population of the so-called "Saxons" and a Roumanian peasantry.

Railways in Transylvania are few and inefficient. Camiola found it a hard task to track down Ildestadt in her time-table.

"Here it is," she said at last. "As you said—two trains a day; and it takes about eight hours to get there from Hermannstadt, which is the extreme end of civilisation. Let me see—yes, this must be it. But why does it say Yndaia in brackets? Are there two stations at Ildestadt?"

"Oh, no. But the proper name—the Roumanian name is Yndaia. Ildestadt is only the Austrian name."

"I have it!" said Camiola suddenly. "We will only take the train as far as Hermannstadt, and thence we will go on to Ildestadt—or Yndaia, which is far more romantic—in the motor."

Irmgard raised her blond head, with two eyes as large as tea-cups."

"*We?*" she repeated faintly. "*You* are not coming to Ildestadt?"

Camiola stretched herself languidly as she lounged upon a dark blue velvet settee. The "Indicateur" slid from

her knees to the ground, and the Persian kitten darted at it. "Why not?" asked Camiola, peering under her lids at Miss Purdon, who sat at work near the window hearkening attentively but without comment.

"Why not?" asked Irmgard vaguely. "Oh, well, because there is simply nothing to come for. I cannot describe to you how desolate the Ildenthal is. Nobody goes there. It is all so primitive, so *savage!* Unless you went there you could not realise."

"But I should like to realise. Why follow the beaten track when there is such a place to be seen by the enterprising? Give me Murray—Baedeker fails here." The girl curled herself round in her chair, and began to read with ever-increasing relish:

"The most beautiful and romantic spot in this wild country, with the exception perhaps of the magnificent gorge known as the Thorda Spalt, is no doubt the valley known as the Ildenthal. The picturesque walled city of Ildestadt—or Yndaia, to give it its proper name—is probably unmatched in Europe. From the city the mountains rise at an incredibly steep gradient, and perched upon the very lap of the heights is the Castle of Yndaia, known now as the Orenfels. As far up as the castle a mule path has been hewn in the living rock, and will remind the traveller strongly of the old mule path up the Grimsel Pass in Switzerland.

"It is to be regretted that an attempt recently made to throw open this interesting and most romantic spot to tourists has lamentably failed.

"Some years ago mineral springs were discovered, of great medicinal value. A hotel was built, baths were in course of construction, and the thrifty Saxon population of Ildestadt looked forward to a new era; but a terrible accident put an end to their hopes. A party from the hotel, accompanied by two guides, experienced mountain-

ers, natives of the Ildenthal, disappeared upon the mountain-side in the August of the year 19—, and no trace of them was ever found. The newly-built hotel had to close its doors the following season, and no attempt has been made as yet to reopen it."

"Why, this is too good to be true! I did not know there was such a place in Europe!" cried Camiola joyfully. "A walled city! A castle on the rocks!! Precipices! Caverns! Above all, a mystery! Why have you never told me anything of all these thrilling stories?"

Irmgard laughed scornfully. "The caverns and the waterfalls are right up in the hills, miles from where we live," said she discontentedly. "Szass Lona is below Ildestadt, and the river which flows down to us—the Ildenfluss—overflows all its banks in winter, and the floods are perfectly sickening. The castle is rather splendid. I went up once to see it. It dates from the twelfth century, I believe."

"Twelfth century castle!" murmured Camiola, entranced. "And here have we—Mizpah and I—been existing all this time without even knowing of its existence, still less that you lived next door! I suppose it is a ruin? Oh, no; from what Murray has to say, it is nothing of the kind. Just attend to this, if you please! 'The castle is a specimen of architecture absolutely unique in Transylvania. A twelfth century fortress, it was the property of almost the only noble Roumanian family still existing in the country—the family of Vajda-Maros. This house ruled the Vale of Yndaia from time immemorial; and in the early sixteenth century they were so rich and powerful that the then Count visited England, and acquired a great admiration for English architecture. The story goes that he persuaded an English architect to go back with him to Transylvania, and design an addition to the castle much in the style of Haddon Hall. This beau-

tiful structure is still intact, and still in possession of the Vajda-Maros. The tragic fact that the heir to the property perished in the catastrophe, whatever it was, which befell the tourist party upon the mountains, gives a romantic interest to the beautiful and ancient edifice.””

There was a little silence. Camiola, seemingly absorbed in the guide-book, was glancing out of the tail of her eye at Miss Purdon—or “Mizpah,” as the two girls usually called her, the name being a contraction, or rather a corruption of “Miss Pur.” After a pause, the oracle spoke.

“Are you thinking that it would be a nice beginning of our travel, to escort Irmgard home, and make a little tour in an almost unknown part of Europe?” she asked calmly.

Camiola looked up hopefully. “You don’t think I’m a lunatic, Mizpah, dear?”

Mizpah laid down her work, and gave the question her full consideration.

“Well, my child,” said she, “I sympathise with you very strongly. This morning’s bad news has thrown out your plans, but I think you feel a hope that they are only postponed. Your impulse is to wait a little—not to start off round the world until you have made certain either that Irmgard can, or that she cannot, accompany you. To stay in London is out of the question, and I think a month in Transylvania would be very pleasant. I suppose we could get there without too much discomfort; and I am not yet too stricken in years to enjoy an adventure.”

“Mizpah, you’re a brick,” cried Camiola impulsively. “I own that I feel quite absurdly attracted by this creepy story. Tell us more about it, Irmgard. Do you remember its happening?”

“We were not there at the time. Papa was appointed

to the command the following spring. We had heard a great deal about the new hotel, and people comforted mamma, and said that Ildestadt was to become a second Sinaia."

"A second what?"

"Sinaia. You know Ildestadt is not far from the Roumanian frontier, and there is a Roumanian watering-place called Sinaia where the king has a palace, and the court ladies go about dressed like Roumanian peasants. Mamma was feeling rather depressed at being sent to such an outlandish part of the world, but people said it was to be quite fashionable, so we were much disappointed when we arrived, to find that the Kur-haus was closed and the whole place deserted."

"Do you know anything of this Roumanian family who own the castle?" asked Camiola. "The Vajda-Maros?"

"Yes, a little. They are very poor and very disagreeable. They can't afford to live at Orenfels, so they have a tiny house, like a prison, in Ildestadt. They are very stiff, and think themselves too grand for the Magyar aristocracy. Papa says that they were like kings in the olden times. Even the Saxons respect them."

"Oh, dear, do tell me what you mean by the Saxons?" cried her friend, bewildered. "There are Roumanians and Magyars, and now you talk about Saxons! Saxons in Transylvania?"

Irmgard laughed. "It is queer, isn't it?" said she. "You know what the Roumanians say about them? They say that they are the descendants of the children that the Pied Piper of Hamelin stole. They came up through the Almescher Hole into Transylvania! But in reality they are colonists who were invited by the Emperor to come in the thirteenth century. They never intermarry with the Roumanians, and they keep their Protestant religion, all among the orthodox population. They are clean and in-

dustrious and steady and ugly and unpleasant. The Roumanians are beautiful and charming, but somehow they never rise. They are an unthrifty lot, papa says."

"Well, it is a queer country!"

"You may well say so. But the fact that most of the townspeople are Saxons is a good thing for you in a way, because they speak German, and you could never understand Roumanian."

"No, indeed! Well, Mizpah, every word increases my desire to go. Picture to yourself a mediæval fortress to which no tourist has ever penetrated! No paper bags nor chocolate paper strewn upon the grass—no names cut upon the hoary stones, no Bier-Halle awaiting you at the '*Schönste Aussichts-Punkt!*'"

"I feel drawn to it almost as strongly as you yourself."

"It's settled," announced Camiola, with an air of decision. "We are going. Ah, but I forgot! Murray says the hotel is closed!"

"Oh, that was the new Kur-haus, up in the woods. There is the Blaue Vögel, in the market square. I should think that would be all right."

Camiola once more appealed to the unerring guide-book.

"'Blaue Vögel, old-world, but comfortable,'" she read. "'R. 3—4. B. 1.50. D. 3. S. 2.' Well, it won't ruin us. Supper, too! How nice and cosy and go-to-bed-at-ten it sounds!"

"You ought to stay with us," said Irmgard with a sigh, "but if poor mamma is so ill——"

"Why, of course! I never dreamt of such a thing! We shan't worry your people a bit. But I shall be there within call, just to help you to buck up, poor old thing. Well, I am glad it is all settled. I'll telephone to the garage for Reed and we will go to Cook's and get our tickets. I suppose we must start to-morrow? What a rush! Can you do it, Mizpah?"

"Oh, dear, yes, two or three hours will see me through with my packing," replied the capable woman.

Camiola flew to the telephone, and thence upstairs to interview her maid.

"Marston," said she, "I am starting for Central Europe to-morrow. It is very sudden, and I quite expect you to say you won't come. All the same, I shall be very disappointed if you do say so."

Marston looked grave.

"Your things to pack and my own, miss?" she asked.

"In time to catch the boat-train to-morrow."

"I think I can do it, miss," replied Marston, without the flicker of an eyelid.

Camiola flung her arms round this indispensable person's neck.

By lunch time, when she returned from Cook's with the tickets, a great part of the preparation was already made.

Meanwhile Miss Purdon had interviewed the downstairs servants, and made all arrangements for leaving Forbes and Mrs. Blagg in charge until the sale should be over. They did not linger over lunch, and were all hard at work upstairs at about a quarter to four, when Forbes came up with a doubtful face, and announced:

"Mr. Neville Thurlow in the drawing-room, miss. I did not like to deny you to him."

"Oh!" cried Camiola, sitting back upon her heels. She had been kneeling by a trunk which she was helping to pack. "Oh, I wish I had told you not to admit anybody! Yet no, perhaps it is as well that he has come, it will save my having to write to Uncle Thurlow." She rose and turned to the basin to wash her hands, while Marston hastened to her with a comb. "Mind, Mizpah, you and Irmgard are both to come down to tea in ten minutes punctually," said she authoritatively.

CHAPTER III

NEVILLE MAKES A MISTAKE

NEVILLE THURLOW was standing in the window, gazing out upon the gardens of the square, when his cousin entered. He turned a pale face to her.

He was a tall man, of rather narrow build, with a face which only just escaped being handsome. The fact that his hair and eyebrows were drab, and his eyes cold and expressionless, prevented one from realising how good his features were.

His hand, as he greeted Camiola, felt cool and limp in hers, and as she sat down in a chair from which she previously dislodged one of the cats, which she picked up in her arms, she was thinking what a dreary kind of person he was.

At the age of twenty-three poor Neville has been wholesomely and happily in love. The lady of his choice had, however, not found favour in the parental eyes. It was at that time quite impossible for Neville to assert himself. His whole future depended upon his father, who made the fullest use of the lever of power he enjoyed. Since that time Neville had winced away from emotional experience.

A year ago he would have asked Camiola to marry him without reluctance, though without any kind of enthusiasm. But to-day, unfortunately for him, the case was otherwise. He did not himself as yet understand why.

He looked at the door vaguely, as if expecting, or perhaps hoping, that another girl would follow Camiola into

the room. He knew that he ought to be glad that they two were alone. He had his opportunity. His mother would be terribly upset if he did not make the most of it.

"Well," he said, forcing a smile, "not overcome with the effort of the birthday party?"

"Why, I'm afraid I didn't realise that it *was* an effort," replied the girl. "Miss Purdon takes the cares of Martha upon her shoulders for me to an extent which is perhaps unwise, as far as my moral training goes."

"I find no fault with your moral training, Camiola," he put in with a smile, and an impression that he had taken a chance creditably.

"That's awfully nice of you," replied his cousin composedly; "and it is also nice of you to come and pay your visit of digestion so soon. In fact, if you had come one day later it would have been too late."

"Too late! What do you mean?" he asked hurriedly.

"Oh, we are all in such a rush and a bustle," she laughed. "Poor little Irmgard—I should say my friend, Fräulein Maldovan—had bad news this morning. Her mother is ill, and she is summoned home at once. The result is that Mizpah and I have decided to take her home, and stay in Transylvania for a while ourselves. We are all off by the boat-train to-morrow."

"*Transylvania?*" echoed the young man incredulously. "My dear Camiola, you speak as calmly as if you were going to Boulogne. Have you realised the difficulties, the fatigues of such a journey—or the lack of civilisation when you get there?"

She laughed. "You see, Irmgard lives out there, and knows the ropes. Otherwise I might not venture."

Neville sat still. Two ideas fought within him. The first was, that this moment was his only chance to propose, as it were, spontaneously. The second was a rush of pity for a certain blond young girl who was in trouble.

He choked back the second feeling and spoke in blind haste. "So you really are going? Leaving England? This is the last time that I shall see you? Oh, then, Camiola, you cannot blame me if I am precipitate! I—won't you let me tell you—ask you?"

He was on his feet and approaching. Camiola leapt up with a gasp, holding the grey cat before her as though for a shield against this wholly unexpected onslaught. Yet, even as she rose, she told herself that she must let him say a few words more. She would not fall into the error of refusing a proposal that had not been made. At Oxford she had received two offers of marriage—one from a don, and one from Mizpah's cousin, the penniless young Irish peer, who, much to Mizpah's annoyance, had prematurely disclosed himself and been appropriately snubbed. She was not, therefore, quite a novice at the game poor Neville was playing so inadequately.

He ventured quite near, and managed to say, after a pause in which to summon up his courage, "I came here to-day to ask you to be my wife."

Camiola was divided between anger and pity. She guessed that he had been egged on to make this deplorable mistake, but it was one which could easily be remedied, seeing that she felt sure his heart was not involved.

She put down the cat and held out both hands to him.

"Thank you, Neville, for paying me the highest honour a man can pay a woman," she said gravely, "but let me say at once that what you suggest is wholly out of the question. I don't care for you one little tiny bit in the way you would want your wife to care; and it is a very good thing I don't, for the marriage of first cousins is always a mistake, and I am modern enough to feel strongly on the subject."

He hardly knew whether what he felt was more relief or mortification.

He held her two hands very tightly, remarking, as he looked down at them, how daintily kept they were, how softly they curled about his own. Perhaps he was nearer to loving Camiola than than he had ever been.

"Is that final?" he asked. "You can't expect me to take 'No' without an effort to change it into 'Yes.' I would be good to you, I would do all I could to make you happy. I—we—we have known each other all our lives. Don't you think perhaps later on you might grow to care—you might change your mind?"

She shook her head, smiling at him with a cold, remote little smile which seemed to tell him without words what miles away he was from her mentally. He did not understand her, and in a way he was afraid of her. As he let go her hands he knew how glad he was that after all he had failed.

"I don't want to rub it in, Nev," she said, "but you have made a great mistake. I have never cared a bit for you, and I am sure you cannot have thought I did. I have not flirted, have I?"

"Oh, no, no! A hundred times no! But one cannot always tell," he muttered confusedly. "Sometimes a girl will say and do nothing at all to let you think she cares, and when once you speak you find out that she is—that she has been——"

"Expecting it," laughed Camiola. "I dare say. I assure you that I was not expecting your declaration. Let us forget it, shall we? I hear Forbes and the teacups approaching, and Mizpah and Irmgard are both anxious to bid you good-bye. Don't go. You don't bear malice, do you?"

"Indeed no. You have been very good to me," he faltered; and broke off abruptly as the door was opened and tea came in.

Almost immediately after, Miss Purdon and Fräulein

Maldovan made their appearance. Neville's habitual coldly reserved manner stood him in good stead now. He felt pretty certain that Camiola would not "give him away" to these ladies, and he did his best to talk naturally and to express just the right amount of regret at their sudden departure. "Though London is awful now," he admitted.

"If we like the Ildenthal, and stay there for some weeks, as Camiola seems half inclined to do, you and Mr. Bassett ought to come out and join us there," suggested Mizpah, when their destination had been discussed.

It so happened that, when she spoke, Neville's eyes were fixed upon Irmgard, who was pouring milk into the kitten's silver saucer. The least change of colour upon her extremely fair complexion was clearly visible. As the words were uttered he saw the warm blood flow into the somewhat pale cheeks; and at the bottom of his heart he felt a queer pain. Instead of hastily declaring that Transylvania was the ends of the earth, he suddenly felt a desire to go there.

"That's a great scheme, Miss Purdon," said he. "I will turn it over in my mind. But what says my cousin?"

"There is a hotel at Ildestadt. I cannot prevent your coming to stay there," replied Camiola with a teasing smile. "I must warn you, though, that it is a dangerous place, by all accounts. Likely young men disappear on the mountain-side, on a sunny afternoon, and even their bones are not afterwards to be found."

"Oh, Camiola, don't be so horrid!" cried Irmgard, with a laugh. "Such an accident has only happened once, Mr. Thurlow"—to Neville's odd pleasure she pronounced it "Turlow"—"and the young man was not much to be regretted, if what they say of him in the neighbourhood be true."

"Why, what do they say?" asked Camiola. "It interests me."

"Oh, that he drank and ruined the family, and all kinds of things."

"Perhaps his disappearance was arranged—it must have been very convenient for the survivors," laughed Camiola. "What is the theory in the place as to what became of the party?"

"Oh, that they fell into some cavern without a bottom. There is a place there known as the Gaura Draculuj."

"The what?" cried Camiola, in mock horror, adding aside to Neville: "She understands Roumanian. Isn't it awful?"

"Gaura Draculuj means either the Devil's Hole or the Dragon's Hole," replied Irmgard. "Dragon and Devil are the same word in Roumanian. I have never been to the place, but I believe it is very horrible. If you roll a rock in over the edge you hear it bump, bump, bump, each time growing fainter and fainter, and the sound dies away very gradually, as if it still went on bumping, but too far off for you to hear."

"Horrible!" said Camiola with a shudder, "but the whole party could not have fallen into such a place, unless they deliberately cast themselves in."

"Or were dragged in," answered Irmgard in a low voice.

"Dragged in! What, by the wicked young man who drank?"

"Oh, no."

"Well, tell us by whom; tell us, Irmgard."

Irmgard grew rosy and was shy. "I will not. You will only laugh at me."

"I shall not laugh, Fräulein Maldovan," eagerly said Neville.

"Tell us, don't be silly," urged Camiola less tenderly.

"Oh, they say on the mountain that there are things—creatures—monsters—I don't know. Like the things that lived before the Flood. Monster lizards—what you call dragons. They say one lives down there, and that if people throw down rocks they make him angry."

"Oh, Irmgard, how horrible!" cried Camiola, with a real shudder.

Miss Purdon laid down her cup and looked incredulous. "Such legends are not uncommon in wild districts," said she composedly. "Was any trace of the missing party ever found?"

"I never heard of it."

"I hope," remarked Neville, after a little silence, "that Miss—I mean, Fräulein Maldovan does not live very near the abode of this prehistoric terror?"

"Oh, no, miles away, in a not-romantic spot," she told him laughingly.

She had a dimple in both cheeks when she laughed.

Miss Purdon rose. "It is a very creepy legend, I own," said she. "But we must cut short the rest of it now. I know you will forgive us," she went on, turning to Neville with outstretched hand, "but these children have their packing to finish, and must go early to bed. You must positively come to Ildestadt yourself and collect the legends of the dragon."

She knew that he could not come without Bassett, as he had himself no knowledge of any foreign tongue, and in such an outlandish place English would be of no use at all.

"I think that is a really good idea," said Camiola heartily. "We will write to you, Neville, when we are there, if the place fulfils our expectations, and we can then reserve rooms for you in the inn. I suppose it would not be before September?"

"It shall be as soon as I can get away," replied the

young man, with his eyes upon Irmgard's lowered lids.

He walked home in a curious state of mind. He decided to tell his mother that to-day had not been auspicious for pressing his suit, as Camiola was up to the neck in a new plan; but that he had the best possible grounds for hope, since he had received a pressing invitation to spend part of his vacation with them in a wild, remote spot, where it was most unlikely that Camiola would come across anything resembling an eligible *parti*.

His father and mother, he feared, would be as strongly against any affair between himself and Irmgard as they had been against his youthful fancy. But times had changed. He was now a man, and earning his own living. Surely his marriage depended upon himself and not upon his mother's scheming!

CHAPTER IV

THE MEDLÆVAL CITY

THE motor slid smoothly along the good wide road bearing Camiola France and Miss Purdon ever upward, though by almost imperceptible degrees, from the hamlet of Szass Lona to that walled city of Ildestadt described by Murray as "probably unmatched in Europe."

They had just left Irmgard in the bosom of her family, and the shadow of the Maldovan anxieties still lingered over Camiola and wrung her tender heart.

So far the scenery was disappointing. Irmgard had spoken truly when she said that Szass Lona was not a specially beautiful place. It was a scattered village of the Alpine type, and lay in a wide valley, traversed by a river the waters of which were almost obliterated by the stoniness of the bed over which—one might almost say, under which—it flowed.

In the direction of Ildestadt the prospect facing them as they travelled was bounded by a bare grassy hillside, in appearance not unlike Carnedd Llewelyn, as one approaches the Nantfrangçon Pass from Capel Curig. It was only at the last moment that they had determined to take Reed and the car with them. The transit had been somewhat troublesome, but they were now rejoicing over their decision, which had saved them six hours in the journey between Hermannstadt and Szass Lona.

General Maldovan was deeply touched by the kindness and generosity with which Camiola had brought him back his daughter, and by her sympathetic entering into his

trouble. His wife was by no means yet out of danger, and the various children, of different ages, looked woebegone and as if astray in a world where "Mütterchen" had always heretofore presided. Camiola promised them frequent rides in the car. They had never seen one before—it seemed incredible!

The two ladies had been travelling since early morning, it was now five o'clock, and the sun was beginning to decline westward. On that side the valley was quite open, and the warm light poured upon the swelling slopes of the big irregular grass hill.

Camiola was wondering how they were going to cross it. There seemed to be no road ascending upon its bare flank. Then, as they sped onward, she saw that they were going to slip round it on the farther side, between it and a huge rocky bastion which now slowly came into view. Ere long they had swept with caution round a bend of the road which doubled almost flat upon itself; and the Ildenthal lay before them.

"A-a-ah!" ejaculated Miss France.

High above them, as if it looked down upon them with aristocratic contempt, the little walled town lay like a coronet upon the hillside. It sat, so to speak, in the lap of the hills, which held protecting arms on either side. Behind it, the pine woods went up as far as the tree limit; above that one descried the bare bones of the mountain range.

Far up, where the sun slanted across and touched them with fire, Camiola saw white towers among the pines. "Look! There is Orenfels," she whispered; why she should whisper she could not tell. "Is it not like the castle of the Sleeping Beauty?"

Seen as Camiola saw it first, in that fair July afternoon, the beauty of the scene could hardly be exaggerated. Below the city the Ildenfuss made an almost sheer drop

down to where they now were; and the car shot to and fro upon the windings of the road like a tiny shuttle drawing a silver thread across a woof of green velvet, as the girl thought fancifully—now leaving the torrent far behind, now returning so close that the roar of the water thundered in their ears—now flying off again among the rocks, and presently crossing a mediæval bridge, where a rough-looking toll-keeper took money with glances of interest and suspicion at the dainty car.

Just outside the city gates Camiola called to Reed to stop, that she might gaze down from the last bridge at the leaping, roaring waters beneath.

Three separate cascades met and mingled here in an everlasting turmoil of sound and motion. From shelf to shelf the water leapt, flinging itself headlong with seething and roaring. Lumps of spume were caught by the light breeze and driven against the bushes that clung hardily to the steep—torn and wafted away, gone as soon as seen.

“Reed,” said his young mistress, “have you any idea where the railway station can possibly be?”

“It’s right down in the valley, miss,” replied the chauffeur. “I made it out on the map while you was at Miss Maldovan’s, since it’s no good expecting a sensible word out of the head of any of these savages. Miss Marston’s train is due in half an hour, miss, so I must be quick.”

“Yes, yes! Drive us straight to the Blaue Vögel, and then be off as fast as you can.”

In a minute they had passed under an archway still provided with spikes for the heads of criminals, and had entered the walled city.

It was easy to see that the inhabitants of this remote place were of a kind peculiar to themselves. There were a good many people assembled in the streets, some of them extraordinarily handsome, and wearing a distinctive na-

tional costume. The paved street, without sidewalks, had a dip in the centre, doubtless the ancient kennel wherein the city drainage had flowed not so long ago. The mingled scent of coffee and cabbage water, inseparable from all old Continental towns, met one at the very gate.

The buildings were fine. Grand old houses, with projecting gables and carved barge boards, houses which had stood for three or more centuries, lined the route. It was but a small place, and very soon they debouched upon the market square, and it seemed like the culmination of the increasing sense of age and mystery.

In the centre stood a tall thing like a signpost with eaves, under the shadow of which was a dim dark painting. Below, on a shelf, burned a small lamp; and various bunches of flowers, stuck into various pots and jugs, were arranged as votive offerings. It was not market day, so there were but few stalls. To their right was a Stadthaus, its handsome solid masonry showing the industry and capacity of the Saxon townsfolk. To their left was the ancient hostelry known as the Blaue Vögel. The landlord stood at the door, and there was quite a little crowd around him awaiting the arrival of the foreign guests. The appearance of the motor caused a mild sensation, such as the passing of troops might do in London.

The very faces of the crowd seemed to Camiola's excited fancy unlike any she had seen elsewhere. One old woman, with wide, fixed gaze, drew her attention especially. Their eyes met, and the girl felt her heart beat in deep, slow throbs.

They had a glimpse of a slender church tower along a side street, and heard the soft ringing of the "Angelus" as they came to a standstill at the inn doorway.

Nothing could have been more cordial than their welcome. The place, though very old, was more comfortably arranged than they had anticipated; for, at the time when

it was hoped that Ildestadt was to become a *Kur-Ort*, when the new hotel had been built, and the mineral springs exploited, Herr Neumann, the Saxon host, had added to his venerable hostelry such things as he was assured were absolutely necessary to the comfort of the English. The legend, "*Warm und Kalt-wasser Bäder im Hause*," was painted up across the front of his inimitable carved gable.

"Oh, might not this be the town of the Pied Piper, just as it is!" cried Camiola. "Do you remember what Irmgard said of his coming up through a hole in a mountain in Transylvania, leading the little German children, and that they are the ancestors of these Saxon people? I firmly believe that legend is true!"

The food, though very German, was exquisitely clean and well cooked. "Anything for a change—even stewed apricot with roast veal," said Camiola with resignation.

Their first care, on arrival, was to ask if any member of the staff possessed a word of English. One waiter, Karl by name, was produced, and the Wirth very good-naturedly allowed him to get into the car and go down to the station with Reed to help him with his orders about the luggage.

Karl's vocabulary was limited, but Reed and he just managed to understand the matter in question, and Marston duly appeared, a couple of hours later, weary but intact.

The moon was nearing the full that night; and later, when alone in her wonderful old room, full of oaken presses, and panels which suggested secret doors, Camiola opened her casement to the silence and leaned forth.

The city lay wrapped in slumber, and the filmy white light spread itself tenderly over it. She could see right across the market square, up a black height which she knew would be pines by daylight, to where the radiance softly shone upon the towers of Orenfels. In one window

of one tower a light winked. The caretaker up there kept later hours than the citizens below.

The outlines of the buildings which surrounded the square were etched in deepest black against the light behind. She noted that, almost facing the hotel, but in the corner of the square, on the left side of the Stadthaus, there was what looked like a watch-tower. As far as she could judge, by night, it was far older than any of the other buildings which surrounded it.

Ah, what stories the old town could tell if it had a voice that she could understand! How many travellers had lain down to sleep within these glossy black walls which now sheltered her! How many brides of the Vajda-Maros had ridden in through the old stone gateway! How many times had the passing-bell tolled from the big church for the soul of a dead overlord!

She shuddered with a nameless thrill, a vague stirring of excitement that was almost like premonition. It seemed to her that she was more at home here in this old-world place, full of incredible legend, than she had ever felt in Truro Gardens.

She watched a solitary figure—a woman's figure—flitting noiseless from beneath her window, to the dense black shadow on the farther side of the square. When it had disappeared, swallowed in the darkness of the watch-tower, nothing stirred.

Camiola turned reluctantly from the window; and, leaving her casement open to the moon, she cuddled down in her comfortable bed and fell asleep.

Presently she dreamed, and her dream was horrible.

She seemed to be once more standing at the window overlooking the market square, when she saw a movement in the old watch-tower which stood in the opposite corner. Something was emerging from the door which was in the angle of the wall, and as it crawled out of the shadow

into the moonlight she saw that it was a creature like a long glossy black snake, but with legs and wings. It crept out into the centre of the square, and, pausing there, raised its head and glared in at her window. Fascinated she stared, and it stared back.

A voice behind her in the room said, "You had better shut your window, hadn't you?" "I think not," she replied doubtfully, and the voice behind cried hopefully. "Then you know how to break the spell?" "I don't know anything about a spell," she answered, puzzled; and at the same moment the glossy black monster slid swiftly along the stones below till it reached the wall of the inn and began to climb up. Now she tried to shut the window, but in vain. It would not move, and in her dream she never thought of running out of the room. She heard the swish of the creature's body, pressed close to the wall as it came up, and then the flat black head reared up in the moonlit square of the window and laughed aloud.

The horror awoke her. She sprang up in bed, trembling with fear, to find the summer dawn illuminating the corners of the room, and the fresh, sweet air caressing her face.

To reassure herself, she slipped from bed and ran to the window. The square lay glimmering in the growing light, and a man, wearing some kind of wooden sabots, clattered past on the cobble stones. The old watch-tower was now plainly to be seen, and as she gazed, the little door, like a postern, from which, in her dream, the monster had emerged, opened, to disclose the bent form of an aged woman, with a kerchief tied over her hair, who swept some dust from the passage within out into the square. She did not look up, but Camiola had a strange fancy that she was conscious of her presence at the window. She was the old woman whose eyes had met her own in the crowd the evening before. As she crept back

to bed she made a mental memorandum to avoid apricots and veal at supper time. She was so tired that she slept again almost at once, and this time dreamlessly, awaking only when Marston stood at her bedside with a tray of tea—real English tea—made by herself over a spirit stove.

"Marston, you are a wonder! You must be so tired," said Camiola, rubbing her heavy eyes.

"I'm never one to sleep late, miss," replied the maid, "and they are early about in this hotel. A queer little place, isn't it, miss? But the folks seem friendly, and when I can say a few words I shall get along well enough. Me and Reed, we got Karl to tell us, as we came up in the car, what hot water is, and boot-cleaning, and what time is it, and so on."

The first day was spent in motoring down to Szass Lona to make inquiries. The General's wife was decidedly better, though far from being out of danger. Still, she had recognised her daughter, and apparently the sight of her had done real good.

Miss France carried off Conrad, a handsome boy of fourteen, and Hilda, a pretty little girl of nine, for the day. They lunched at the Blaue Vögel, to their own great satisfaction, for they were evidently accustomed to a very monotonous life. Conrad was delightfully Anglophobe, and Camiola enjoyed teasing him a little.

On the morrow the news was equally reassuring, and Irmgard was urgent that they should not come at all the following day, but make an excursion to Orenfels, which she knew Camiola was longing to do. She promised to send a bulletin up to Ildestadt by the evening postman, to say exactly how her mother was, so that they might find a message on their return.

The expedition had to be made either on foot or on

mule-back, so the landlord was instructed to hire mules. Reed was to accompany the two ladies on foot.

They had to take provisions for the day with them, since Herr Neumann assured them that they could obtain nothing whatever, either to eat or to drink, upon their journey.

The day broke in cloudless beauty, and after breakfast they found their steeds awaiting them. They were handsome mules, glossy and well fed, and the harness was so elegant that Camiola remarked upon it.

"How unlike the creatures one gets in Switzerland," she remarked.

"These belong to the Graf von Orenfels, the Vajda-Maros, who is overlord of Yndaia," replied Herr Neumann. "He goes up to the castle about once a week in the good weather, so he keeps the mules for that purpose. However, he is very glad to hire them out to me. There have been but few visitors this summer. It is a difficult journey, true—but one is rewarded upon arrival, *nicht wahr*, Fräulein." He waved his hand eloquently.

"If this place were in Switzerland people would go wild over it!" said Camiola earnestly. "It is like a bit of the Middle Ages."

"Middle Ages! Very good," said the Herr approvingly. "Nothing changes here. Year after year we do not change, and when we tried to change the Saints did not approve. Will you believe, Fräulein, that during the season when the *Kur-haus* was opened not a single miracle was performed by St. Ildemund at his holy well?"

Camiola was surprised. "I thought all the Saxons in Transylvania were Protestants?"

The landlord looked embarrassed.

"Yes—but, yes, Fräulein, that is quite true. There is a pastor and a Protestant Church now in Ildestadt. But we who have lived for centuries in the Ildenthal are not quite like the dwellers in any other valley. The overlord

of Yndaia, which now they call Orenfels, ruled over us, even after we joined ourselves to Austro-Hungary. He dispensed the higher, lower and middle justice for centuries. He willed that the old faith should be our faith. Thus it is that in this valley, as nowhere else in all the country, the Roumanians have intermarried with the Saxons. It is not done now. No. But it was done. Bertha Esler, who takes care of the castle of Orenfels, is half Roumanian."

As he spoke he had mounted both the ladies, and Camiola, deeply interested in his talk, begged to know where the holy well was to be found.

It was explained that they would pass it upon the ascent, just above the abandoned *Kur-haus*.

They started in high spirits. Mizpah, who was anything but fond of mule-riding as a rule, found herself really almost comfortable upon her fine, sure-footed beast; and Camiola could not contain her admiration of the prettily coloured harness and fly-scarers fixed to her steed's head.

The muleteer was a saturnine person, Erwald by name. When introduced to the English ladies, with distinguished courtesy, by the polite Herr Neumann, he had barely acknowledged their kindly greeting. He set out in complete silence, and after asking him two or three questions and obtaining the very shortest replies, Camiola left him alone, and talked English with Reed.

Half an hour upon a good wide path lately made for the purpose of conveying tourists and their luggage, brought them to a small plateau upon which, against a background of black woods, the barrack-like hotel had been erected.

The big announcements, in huge blue letters, across its front of the *welt-berühmte* nature of the mineral springs, and the quality of the air, had a pathetic look. How-

ever widely famed, the advantages of the place had failed to draw the crowd.

Just beyond, where the way once more began to ascend, the path entering the woods, stood a tiny chapel. It was open at its western end, and was large enough to allow of perhaps three persons kneeling in it at once. Close to it stood a stone shrine, with a very ancient carving above it, representing, so far as could be deciphered, a warrior saint, in the act of treading down a serpent, or dragon, which he was vanquishing with the aid of a weapon more nearly resembling a pickaxe than anything else. "Either a pickaxe or an anchor," said Camiola thoughtfully, having dismounted, and gone near to examine.

The chapel was quite clean, and upon the shrine, hanging over the little spring which flowed below it, was a chaplet of honey-coloured banksia roses.

"This is St. Ildemund's Well?" asked Camiola of the taciturn Erwald.

"Ach ja," he responded gloomily.

"It is rather a spring than a well?"

"Ja eben. Eine Quelle."

"Has the water medicinal properties?"

"Das ist eine heilige Quelle," he replied reprovingly.

"Of course," admitted Camiola meekly. "Who keeps it so beautifully and puts the garland on it?"

"It is Bertha Esler, who takes care of the castle, *dort oben*."

"She is a good woman," said Camiola admiringly. So saying, she passed into the little chapel and knelt a few moments in prayer, as her habit was when the chance offered. The muleteer followed her with his eyes, looking surprised. The chauffeur, knowing his mistress's ways, had turned his back and was gazing down the woodland pathway in apparent absence of mind. Mizpah sat still upon her mule, and Camiola made her prayer to the ac-

companiment of the musical tinkle of St. Ildemund's well in the silence.

When she arose and came out again, Erwald actually volunteered a remark in the act of mounting her.

"Bertha prays daily for the soul of her young master who died upon the mountain."

Camiola longed to inquire the details of the tragedy, but she knew and felt instinctively that the moment of the man's first advance was the moment at which she must not ask questions. She said sympathetically, "Indeed!" and hoped for more; but the man strode on in silence.

They wound upwards through woods for an hour or more, and then Erwald called a halt. They ate some cake, and he brought them exquisite water from a "Wasserleitung" which flowed in the hollowed half-trunks of great pines, and was, so he told them, the spring which supplied the Blaue Vögel with drinking water.

Soon they went on once more, the way growing steeper and stonier. They were out of the woods and upon the bare mountain-side, the path they followed having been hewn in the rocks and paved with large stones which made anything but pleasant walking for Reed. The valley grew narrow, the roar of the torrent drowned their voices, and a great loneliness over-shadowed the mind of Camiola.

She had no wish to speak.

Then, turning a corner, they found themselves upon what the Swiss would call an Alp.

Here, on the southern slope of the mountain-side, was a level space of grass and flowers.

And here, desolate and impressive in the hot sunshine, there lay before them the Castle of Orenfels.

CHAPTER V

A CASTLE TO LET

THERE was a delicious perfume of new-mown hay, and in the meadow just before them two or three peasants were piling it into little haycocks, while in the shadow of a big rock which cropped up in the middle of the field, a sleeping baby was watched over by a dog, who also guarded a big stone jar and a bundle of food. These peasants all wore the national dress, and were as evidently Roumanian as the gaunt Erwald, with his broad, flat face and high cheek bones, was Saxon.

Everybody paused in their work and stared as if wholly amazed at the appearance of the tourist party round the winding of the path.

Erwald shouted something in Roumanian, and was answered in apparent disgust by the labourers. He continued his remarks as he approached, and they continued to argue. At last one of the party flung down his rake, moved unwillingly to the place where the sleeping baby lay, took up a coat, into which he wriggled his arms, and turned from the field to walk at the muleteer's side. He was a young man, not tall, but sturdy like all the peasants of the district, and moving lightly on his feet. He had the regular profile, the dignified bearing, the unconscious aristocracy of his race. He looked at the English ladies with a distinct scowl, which almost made Camiola laugh. She said, however, politely, in her pretty, correct German, "I am afraid we are interrupting your work."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Doesn't much matter," he replied indifferently.

"Why have you called him from his work?" asked Camiola reprovingly of Erwald.

"It is young Esler, Bertha's nephew. It is his place to show the castle," replied Erwald.

"You do not have many visitors?" asked the girl prettily, anxious to conciliate.

"We do not," replied young Esler, not at all as if he regretted the fact. Camiola smiled to herself. There had been a buxom maiden among the haymakers, and she thought she could guess why he was sulky.

They walked their mules up a steepish approach, with buildings upon their left, which looked like stabling and a porter's lodge. Before them stood a huge gateway, closed with formidable iron-studded portals, in one of which had been cut a little door, just big enough to admit a man.

Upon the large gates appeared a notice printed in immense black letters, "*Zu vermiethen.*"

"To let!" cried Camiola suddenly. "Do they want to let the castle?" Erwald looked blank, and she corrected herself, saying in German: "I was surprised. I did not know that the Graf wanted to let the castle."

Erwald smiled a little grimly.

"I do not think that he will easily find a tenant," he replied, as he held his hand to dismount the young lady.

— All this part of the castle was evidently far later than twelfth century. In fact, it was like English Tudor architecture, and reminded Camiola vividly of Haddon Hall. She remembered what she had read in "Murray," of the Vajda-Maros who imported an English architect.

Young Esler turned to the porter's lodge and rang an old jangling bell which hung there. They waited, while Erwald walked the mules a little way down the slope, opened a stable door, and led them in.

The note of the bell died away upon the warm air, and

nobody came. Young Esler did not, however, seem perturbed, neither did he ring again. He probably knew that Bertha had some way to journey before she could reach the spot. In her own good time she was heard, pushing up a little sliding shutter, which bore the inscription: "*Eintritt, 1 Mark*," and handing through a large bunch of keys.

The young man said something to her, and after some demur she seemed to assent. Then he closed the shutter and preceded the two ladies to the little door, which he unlocked, signing to them to enter, and adding a caution to stoop.

They found themselves in a square courtyard paved with big flags, in whose cracks the golden-green moss and tiny seedling ferns found a refuge.

Pigeons with iridescent necks were strutting about, preening themselves in the sunshine. Two sides of this court were Tudor, the other two certainly belonged to the earlier date. On the right, with narrow loophole windows, were the ancient servants' or men-at-arms' quarters, and in the corner the rough, ancient, hoary keep. Facing them was an early Gothic chapel and the buildings connected with it. To the left, approached by a semi-circular flight of steps, low and shallow, was the main door of entrance, leading evidently, under its Tudor arch, to the great hall.

Climbing roses grew in the sunny, sheltered place, and all was neat and well-cared-for.

"I will first show you the keep," said their guide, unlocking a tiny postern.

It was the first time that Camiola had ever been inside a keep which was not a ruin. The interior of this place had been modified, probably at the time the sixteenth century portion was added, to provide accommodation for a large household.

The windows were unglazed, the walls bare stone, but the floors were sound. The narrow wooden beds, if not as old as the boards, were certainly venerable.

Camiola's eyes were everywhere, yet she felt that she was having only a cursory survey. She intended to know the old place far more intimately before she had done with it. That magic legend, "*Zu vermiethen*," was dancing before her eyes. Would they let for a short period? As short as one summer, she wondered?

The chapel was next seen, all as reverently kept as the little woodland shrine had been. The brass candlesticks were polished, the flowers bright, and the whole place was gay with pictures—a mass of soft, warm colouring, almost Oriental in effect. The visitors noticed more than one representation of the Devil-dragon, or Dragon-devil, of the legend woven into the profuse ornament.

Thence their guide led them out into the terraced gardens, which lay upon the southwest open slope of the hill, and were full of flowers. The honey-coloured banksia rose, whence the garland that hung before St. Ildemund had been made, smothered the wall under one oriel window, and Camiola pointed it out to Mizpah with a smile.

She felt, as she sat down to rest upon a carved stone seat facing a rose-bordered bowling green, as though the one thing she really desired was to have for her own the room with the oriel that looked out upon this scene.

"Why does the muleteer think that the Graf will not find a tenant for this lovely place?" she asked impetuously.

"Because there is no road for motors," replied Esler, standing before her with his bunch of keys. Ildestadt itself is much out of the way and hard to reach; and even when you have got so far, to ascend hither on mule-back takes many hours. We had an American millionaire, the year before last, who declared he would make a road; but

even he was daunted by the cost. His wife said it was not worth it, to come and be buried in such a place. She also feared ghosts."

As he added this information he smiled for the first time, very faintly, showing even, short teeth.

Camiola smiled in response. "Of course, you have ghosts here," she said.

He seemed to fold himself up again in a moment, and replied conventionally, "So it is said. I have not seen them."

"Where are they to be seen?" asked Camiola.

"I shall in due course show you the haunted chamber," he replied primly.

They went indoors. The dining hall was fine, with a minstrels' oaken gallery, and the ancient trestle tables at which the retainers had probably sat at the time of the first building of the castle. A wide oak stair led up to the drawing-room; and there Camiola just gave a little cry and ran to the window.

This was the oriel—big enough to hold a gate-leg table and a semi-circular window-seat in carven wood—overlooking the sunny gardens and away down the blue valley to the towered walls of the mediæval city.

Faded tapestries covered the walls, faded carpets the oaken floor, the furniture was scanty and stately, the carved chimney-piece bore the date 1561.

They put in a porcelain stove in the eighteenth century," said Esler, "but the late Graf had it taken away. He thought it spoilt the room."

"Wise man!" cried Camiola.

"It is, nevertheless, very cold here in winter," was the somewhat crushing comment of the young peasant.

The bedrooms were perhaps the weak point of the house. They were mostly small and dark, and they opened into each other in an inconvenient way. A large

family could not have been installed unless one made use of the rough accommodation of the keep.

There were, however, one or two state chambers of better dimensions, and Camiola thought it would be possible to make Arnold Bassett and Neville comfortable. She had gone so far upon the road of her new idea!

Hot water and lighting, she reflected, as she descended the stairs, would be the main difficulties; but labour in that part of the world was doubtless not dear.

As they re-entered the hall they saw that Bertha Esler and Erwald were both there. Bertha had laid a clean cloth upon one end of the trestle table, and was unpacking from Erwald's basket the provisions that Frau Neumann had provided.

"Oh, Mizpah, how nice!" was the girl's pleased exclamation. "You are very good to give yourself so much trouble," she added in German to Bertha.

"The Herrschaften are welcome," replied Bertha very gravely. "It is more wholesome to eat at table than sitting upon the grass."

Camiola was not sure that she agreed; but when it was a question of eating in this wonderful old place, gazing round at the antlers and weapons, and breathing, as it were, the atmosphere of the past, there could be no idea of her preferring to be elsewhere.

"What about Reed?" asked Miss Purdon.

"Oh, give him his portion and let him go and eat it outside," replied Camiola, putting rolls and chicken and ham together. "You would rather, wouldn't you, Reed? Do you speak English?" she went on, turning to young Esler.

"No," he replied with a flash of resentment, much as though she had asked him, "Do you steal or tell lies?"

She laughed in much amusement. "Reed, you will have to learn German, or perhaps Roumanian, and stand

up for your country," said she. "Here is an Anglophobe for you of the first quality. When you drink your wine, lift your glass and cry: '*Es lebe das England! Hoch, England!*' and see what he will say."

The retainers withdrew and left the two ladies to lunch in silence.

Camiola's brain was so busy that she said nothing at all for a long time, but gazed out across the courtyard from the diamond-paned window, whose tops were glowing with the heraldic blazoning of the Vajda-Maros. At last she said:

"Mizpah, tell me truly, what impression does this place make upon you?"

"I think it most interesting. There is such a fascination about its being so deserted, so out of fashion, as you may say," replied Miss Purdon. "Even the American millionaire sounded wrong. I resented his introduction, though he has been so obliging as to take himself off. You know what I mean."

"Exactly. That is the feeling one has. Of having discovered Ildestadt, above all, of having discovered Orenfels," replied Camiola. "I hardly dare to suggest it—it sounds so wild—but I do feel as if I badly want to take this place for a few weeks. I wonder if they would let it for a short term, or if you think me stark mad to wish to have it?"

Miss Purdon smiled. "Women are curious creatures," she replied, "and I have to own that a week ago I might have thought you foolish to contemplate such a step. You would never guess the reason which prompts me now to think that I should like a move! It is because I do not sleep at all comfortably at the Blaue Vögel."

"Mizpah! But why did you not say so? My own bed is most comfy; I will complain at once——"

"Oh, it isn't the bed. That, as you say, is most comfy.

It is something in the atmosphere, either of the room, or the house, or the town which is—which is—which is—well, not comfy at all."

Camiola did not reply, but her parted lips and eager eyes invited more.

"I have bad dreams," said Mizpah.

"That is the suppers, isn't it?" asked Camiola. "I had a nightmare the first night, and put it down to the menu."

"So did I," replied her friend in a voice which clearly meant that she thought this a mistaken verdict.

"What did you dream?" asked Camiola, after an interval.

"My dreams seem always connected with that queer little old house that faces us across the market square—the house with a tower."

"I know," replied Camiola quickly.

"I had a most horribly circumstantial dream of a witch-burning the other night. I hardly know at this moment whether to call it a dream or a vision. There were things in it that I do not think I could have invented. The stake was planted just in front of that shrine, or whatever you call it, where the people put flowers, and the woman was brought on a flat cart. She was huddled together and seemed half dead with fear. Four men held her while she was tied up. It was indescribably awful, but I had to look. When she was fast bound, a messenger ran to the tower house, and there marched out in procession a whole family—father, mother, sons, daughters—and the old man who seemed to be the head of the family had a lighted torch handed to him, and actually set fire to the straw! I woke up kicking, fighting, almost screaming out loud!"

The dignified lady coloured quite hotly as she admitted how deeply a mere dream had had power to affect her.

"It is queer that my nightmare, too, was connected with

that house," remarked Camiola. "Mine was not so bad as yours—it was too silly to be really bad. Yours is perfectly horrible."

"It was. I have dreamed, too, of somebody who went into the tower house, and I was told, or found out, that he was never seen to emerge. I dreamed that I stood out there watching, to see whether he would come, and in the darkest part of a very dark night I saw them carry out a dead body. . . . The curious part of it all is, that I never remember taking any particular notice of that house while I was awake. There is nothing very remarkable about it."

"It is quite queer," reflected Camiola. "Anyhow, it is not pleasant to have bad dreams, because, if one goes to sleep in the fear of them, they often come. Also it seems to be setting in very hot, and Ildestadt is shut in—there is no garden to the inn, and the town sanitation is what Uncle Remus would describe as 'powerful lackin'. I feel as if we should breathe better up here if we can persuade them to let it for a short while."

"You can hardly go away altogether and leave Irmgard in such anxiety," replied Mizpah. "Really, yesterday I felt so perturbed in my mind that I was ready to suggest deserting her. This would be a better plan. If we moved up here, you would need to hire mules for us all, and I dare say we might have to put up with minor inconveniences. But we should have the free air of heaven in which to breathe, a garden full of roses in which to be lazy, and we should be out of sight of the tower house, which seems to me to be the centre of the baleful influence."

CHAPTER VI

ESLER MAKES A BANG

HAVING finished their lunch, the two ladies made their way out into the gardens once more, and Miss Purdon sat down upon the stone seat, while Camiola stretched her slim length upon the ground at her feet.

They talked seriously of the plan of becoming for a time tenants of this wonderful place—assigning the bedrooms, discussing the advisability of sending to England for their own servants, and facing the question of baths and hot water.

“After all, hot water is a mere question of fires enough, and kettles enough, and people enough to look after them,” said Mizpah.

“And fuel enough—but I should think wood is cheap hereabouts.”

“Yes. The one master question, as to a sufficient water supply, ought to be easily answered. There seem to be springs everywhere.”

“We shall have to leave the motor in the garage at the Blaue Vögel and let Reed live here with us. He would be too miserable down in the town by himself.”

“Yes. I am inclined to think we had better engage our whole staff from hereabouts, except for him and Marston. Mrs. Blagg would be worse than useless here—pampered London thing!”

“I agree with you,” replied Mizpah. “We must have a native cook who will keep house for us, if such a creature is to be had. One would not know the sort of thing you

can obtain in such a spot, and the language difficulty alone would make an English cook impossible."

As they talked it really seemed as if the idea, which had first presented itself as a wild chimera, might become practicable with a little study.

After a while the sunny sleepiness of the place made Camiola drowsy. Her voice died away, and for a few minutes she dropped into unconsciousness. She awoke with the start which one sometimes experiences at the idea that somebody is watching. Before her on the grass stood the graceful, well-knit form of the young peasant, Esler, his gaze bent seriously upon her sleeping face. As she sat up, brushing her eyes with her hand, she saw him colour and lower his lids, as though he knew he had been looking at her as a man may look upon a maiden, and not as an inferior at his social superior. The idea rather pleased her, for she had been sensible of a kind of smothered hostility in his former bearing. Her position was, however, a trifle undignified, and, glancing at the bench, she found that Mizpah had strolled away.

Leaping lightly to her feet, she asked, "Is it time to return?"

He looked surprised. "The Fräulein does not, then, desire to see the cavern?"

"Oh!" cried Camiola with sparkling eyes, "I did not know that you had a cavern to show! By all means let us see it. Do you know where the lady is?"

Miss Purdon had not gone far—merely as far as the Renaissance stone balustrade, upon which one could lean elbows and gaze down upon the valley below.

She did not, however, take kindly to the cavern idea. She thought, if Camiola would excuse, she would remain upon the stone bench and read her book. The chauffeur would look after his young mistress.

Camiola assented readily to this, for Mizpah was not

active. Reed was summoned, and the three set out together, retracing their steps to the courtyard, and thence to the postern door of the keep.

Here they found that three tin candlesticks with metal backs, each containing a dirty tallow candle, had been placed. Esler gathered them up, carried them with him into the keep, and unlocked a little door in the wall of the lowest room. This done, he lit the candles, handed one to each of his companions, and bade them follow, treading carefully lest the steps were damp.

“Then this rock—upon which the fortress was built—is actually full of caves?” asked the girl, as she carefully descended.

“Full of them,” replied Esler. “They made excellent prisons in the early days of Yndaia.”

They reached the foot of the stairs, and he unlocked another door. This led them into the very heart of the mountain. For some distance—perhaps three hundred yards, or more—they were in a tunnel which had been artificially enlarged to enable a man to walk upright. Then they came out into a curious place. The candles showed a tumbled mass of boulders all about them, a vertical wall of rock on their left, and to their right a black lofty space, whose top the lights could not illumine.

“Blow out your lights, if you please,” said young Esler in his peculiarly gentle tones. “I will rekindle them for you in a moment, but I want you to see a certain effect.”

When they had obeyed, raising their eyes at his direction, they saw at a great height upon their right a far blue glimmer, descending in slanting fashion towards them. As their eyes grew used to it they saw that it was a small filter of daylight, and that it entered high above them, and shone down over a slope covered with tumbled rocks and stones.

“That is where the water comes in,” went on the clear

voice. "In the course of ages it has brought down all these loose rocks that you see. On your left is a solid wall of rock, with only a small outlet at its base. The water finds a way through, but the stones are left behind."

"There is no water now," remarked Camiola.

"Only after rain," he replied tranquilly.

So saying, he relit the candles and led the way on past the great slope of stones.

"Can one go up it?" asked Camiola.

"If the Fräulein wishes, we will go out that way upon our return," he answered, "and regain the castle by a wood-path."

They went on down a tunnel where they had to stoop from time to time. Esler called their attention to the natural archways which the water had hollowed for itself, and the small circular domes in the roof formed by its swirlings.

Presently a pretty, gentle, murmuring sound made itself heard—the soft singing of water flowing somewhere. Turning a corner, they came upon it. It flowed in a channel about six feet wide, leaving a narrow pathway on one side along which they could walk dry-shod. At the spot where they first saw it, it disappeared under a very low arch into the rock.

"That," said young Esler, "is the stream which supplies the castle. From the place at which you stand to the point at which it emerges from the mountain would take you ten minutes to walk if you walked straight there from here. We once put some colouring matter into the water at this point. It was an hour and a half before it came out at the other end."

Camiola, deeply interested, translated all the information to Reed. Esler warmed to his work. Evidently this cavern was the great interest of his life. He led them along for about a quarter of a mile by the brink of the purl-

ing stream. It seemed hard to believe that this subterranean corridor was natural; but he assured them that it was. Presently they reached the place whence it emerged from the rock as mysteriously as it later disappeared therein.

"You have now," said Esler, "three or four thousand feet of rock above your heads. The echo of a sudden noise just at this spot is very curious. If you will wait a moment, *Ich will eine Erschütterung machen*"—(make an explosion or crash).

He lit a small piece of magnesium wire from the flame of his candle, went a few paces, let it fall upon the ground, and set his foot upon it. "A million horrible bellowing echoes woke," and Camiola, for a moment, felt her heart go into her mouth, though she knew in her inmost being that the young man must be well accustomed to the result of such a proceeding.

She stood very still as the maker of the shattering noise tranquilly reapproached her.

"Was it here?" she asked tremulously, "that the exploring party was lost?"

He turned away as if she had suddenly rebuffed him. "Oh, no," he replied sulkily.

"Then—then the place you call the Gaura Draculuj is not in this part of the mountain?"

He turned and looked at her. "Who spoke to you, Fräulein, of the Gaura Draculuj?"

"The Fräulein Maldovan."

"Ach so! The Fräulein is a friend of the Herr General's family?"

"Yes. That is what brought me to Ildestadt."

He nodded, as if such a proceeding did indeed need explanation, and was now plausibly accounted for. "The Gaura Draculuj is a long way from here," he replied, trimming the wick of his candle. Then he raised it above

his head. "The height of this cavern, where we now stand, has never been ascertained," he said. "But, in spite of its height, this place is very quickly flooded. Several days' heavy rain fills all the tunnel, and it was here that those whom the overlord wished to get rid of quietly were confined. As we return—for we can get no farther in this direction—I will show you the sliding door by which the victim was shut in. It is not a door, but a grating, so that the flood water could eventually escape, but it had plenty of time to drown a man first."

"What fiends they were in those days!" muttered the girl passionately.

"We must remember," replied the young man thoughtfully, "that our modern apparatus of law was not available to them. They made their own justice, and often it was better justice than the kind which is now dealt out by the cartload from the hands of a government which has no personal knowledge of the people's wants."

There was an edge of bitterness in his voice. The girl reflected that, even though he was as she supposed a Saxon, yet he served the true, Roumanian owners of the country. Naturally, her own connection with the Hungarian Government official would not endear her to him.

She smiled rather teasingly at him. "You defend the feudal tyrannies?" she inquired.

"The Eslers have served the overlords of Yndaia for many generations," he snapped, turning as if with a determination to trifle no longer with this foreigner, and striding back along the way they had come.

By the time they reached the large cavern with the slope of loose stones he had regained his good temper, and he was very courteous and capable, holding the candle to show the girl a kind of faint track, worn among the rough fragments, which wound to and fro upon the difficult ascent.

Light and active, she made nothing of it, and, though he did not presume to speak, she felt that he admired her agility.

They crawled out through the low aperture which admitted the blue glimmer, and as they emerged Camiola thought the world had never looked so glorious, so vividly coloured, in all her life before. They were in a charming little wood upon the mountain-side, and the sun was pouring through the light foliage of young larches, and beginning to ripen into scarlet the glossy, slim berries of the barberry bushes which grew here in profusion. The sky seemed bluer than sky usually is, and Camiola sank upon the moss with a long sigh, oddly blent with a smile of delight, recalling to herself the "ballad of Reading Jail." For a moment the shadow of the prison grate "that slurs the sunshine half a mile" lay upon her spirit, and the prayer for all prisoners and captives took a new meaning.

"How beautiful everything looks," said she slowly.

Reed, blinking at the daylight, grinned sympathetically. "Does seem friendly," he remarked. "Nice lot these foreigners are, seemin'ly, shutting up prisoners to drown like rats in a hole."

"Oh, but that was in the Middle Ages; and we were every bit as bad in England then. Have you never seen that black hole in the Curfew Tower at Windsor, where you were shut up without light, food or air, and just left to die?"

"Glad I wasn't born in those times, miss," was the contented reply.

Esler suddenly knelt down in the moss at her feet, and, with a murmured "Excuse me," took a bit of her skirt in his hand. Glancing down, she saw that she had allowed a shower of grease from her candle to fall upon the tweed. The young man drew a knife from his pocket and care-

fully detached the dry tallow, she watching him the while in a fascinated way, pondering his quiet self-possession, which she found attractive. When he had removed the last fragment, he produced a clothes-brush and removed the dust from her hems.

She thanked him, smiling, as she rose from the ground, but he was leading the way and seemed not to hear.

They soon made their way down the hillside, and their guide admitted them into the castle through a tiny door which led into the chapel sacristy.

They found that Erwald had saddled the mules and that Mizpah was awaiting them, making somewhat laborious efforts to converse with Frau Esler, who seemed extremely reserved.

Camiola, with a word of graceful thanks, put a gold piece into the woman's hand, and gave another to young Esler. He was standing, cap in hand, to see them depart, and when she gave him the money he looked at it, flushed, and, glaring at her resentfully, tendered it back. "I have no change," he said; "the charge is five marks—one apiece for seeing over the castle, and one apiece for the *Höhle*."

Camiola felt uncomfortably hot. She had once previously found herself in a place where the natives were too proud to accept tips, and she did not wish to hurt his feelings. "The rest is a present for you to remember me by," said she pleasantly, "and I may give you more trouble before you have done with me. I hope to come here again this summer."

"Again?" he asked, as if much surprised. "There is no more to see." He spoke very earnestly. "No more at all."

"But do you think one can take in everything by just seeing it once?" she inquired. "I cannot. I have not half satisfied my curiosity about this fine old place. No, no," she added, embarrassed, as he still made as though

to reject her gift. "I have taken you from your work, yes, and"—slyly—"from your friends also during all the best part of the day. You must let me repay you for so much time and trouble."

He fell back and dropped his hand from her bridle; but as she rode away she felt that he was not pleased, but, on the contrary, really annoyed and humiliated. This stung her, for she did not like having made a mistake. She felt inclined to tease him, and as she rode away she turned half round in her saddle, crying with much meaning:

"Auf wiedersehen!"

His blue eyes flashed, and he answered without hesitation:

"Leb'wohl, gnädiges, Fräulein!"

She was half laughing, half angry, as she turned the corner into the wood, leaving the enchanted castle behind. But the thorny nature of these peasants, so difficult of access, so unapproachable by means of the appeal of the pocket, pleased her. The natives seemed as much out of the common as the house itself.

Herr Neumann was at the door when they rode, a couple of hours later, into the market square, and waved his hand in cheery welcome. While helping them to dismount, he made many inquiries as to what they thought of the castle, the fine building, the prospect, and so on. He seemed much gratified and a little astonished at the fullness of their admiration.

"Have you any idea," asked Camiola, "of what rent the landlord asks for the castle, and whether he would let for a short period?"

The landlord laughed comfortably. "What! The *hochwohlgeborene* thinks of becoming his tenant? And what then will she do with the so-convenient little automobile?"

"That will have to stay with you, Herr Neumann. When I want to use it I must come here to fetch it, and probably sleep a night in Ildestadt or elsewhere. I think that would answer very well."

"Oh, yes, yes, certainly that could be managed." He looked as though the idea that she was speaking seriously had only just occurred to him. "Well," he went on, as if reflecting, "and why not? The gracious one is doubtless rich, as the English are known to be, and she will see that it costs something to get provisions and fuel carried up the mountain-side?"

Camiola shrugged her shoulders. "I do not know about being rich," she replied, "but I am out for a holiday, and if I choose to spend part of it in a baronial castle, I am willing to pay a fair price for my pleasure."

"Well, then," replied the host, still turning over the idea in his mind, "you had better call upon the Graf and make your application to him in person."

"Certainly. Where does he live?" asked Camiola eagerly.

The man made a gesture with his hand. "Over there, Fräulein, across the market square, in the house with the watch tower."

Mizpah and Camiola looked at each other.

CHAPTER VII

THE OVERLORD OF YNDAIA

CAMIOLA let her eyes travel to where that ancient, almost sightless, huddled little tower squatted before her eyes. Turning to Mizpah, she said rapidly under her breath, "If we were to go inside it, I expect that would break the spell."

"It might," replied Mizpah hurriedly, "but we will wait for to-morrow morning, I think."

"I will send word across to the Herr Graf by Erwald," suggested the Wirth, "that you would like to make an appointment for to-morrow morning, if that is your wish."

"Yes. At his convenience," replied she. "But please do not tell him any stories about my fabulous wealth, or he may ask a rent which I cannot afford. I do not mean to pay a fancy price. General Maldovan will help me with my negotiations."

The landlord looked as though fully aware of the advantage which her friendship with the General would give her when it came to bargaining. "I expect," he said, "that the Graf would accept any reasonable offer. He is very poor."

"It seems sad—such a fine old family," replied the girl pensively. "Oh," she added on the impulse of the moment, "perhaps you can tell us something about the saint who has a chapel in the woods and is carved in his picture in the act of killing a dragon? Frau Esler told me that she knew of no legend of a dragon in these parts."

"Bertha told you that?" cried the man sharply. He

checked himself, and smoothed the mule's nose, smiling, before adding, "Bertha is a foolish woman. Certainly there is a legend of the slaying of a dragon by St. Ilde-mund. But it is, of course, mythical, legendary, as the Herrschaften will readily believe."

Camiola regarded him critically. There seemed to be a discrepancy between his almost modern attitude with regard to the dragon and the simplicity of his belief in miracles, so artlessly expressed that morning. It looked as though he did not wish them to believe in the dragon—and the only conceivable reason for that must be that he himself did believe in it and feared it. She thought of Irmgard's curious suggestion as to the disappearance of the tourists on the mountain. With this she connected instantly young Esler's obvious desire that she should not see the Gaura Draculuj, and his aunt's denial of any knowledge of a dragon legend. It seemed almost certain that these mediævally minded persons really did believe in the existence of a prehistoric monster somewhere in the fastnesses of the Ildengebirge. This was altogether delightful. She could not have hoped that such a place existed in Europe. As she glanced around, in the low evening light, at the place in which they stood, she felt the illusion creep over her too, until she could wellnigh picture herself as having slipped back some half a dozen centuries—until she could fancy the windows full of eager faces, the bells ringing a glad chime, and the whole city a-tiltœ to see some Dieudonné de Gozon ride through the gates, dragging the corpse of the slain enemy by a rope tied to its hideous neck.

"The dragon is the crest of the Vajda-Maros family, I think?" she asked. "I noticed it carved above the gateway and over the mantel in the state apartments?"

"Yes, it is their crest, and legend says that the saint was a member of their family. He had a little hermitage

on that spot where now his chapel stands, and, as I told you, many miracles are worked at his shrine, though not so many as formerly."

"It is all very interesting," mused the girl.

"The gracious ones should go to-morrow and see the tombs of the family in our great church of St. Ildemund, here in the Kirchen Strasse. They are truly magnificent. Few families can show so many generations. The lords of Yndaia ruled a whole province. It is the only part of Transylvania in which the Saxons ever submitted to Roumanian rule. The overlord would not have them in his province but on his own terms: yet even he could not stop the change of names when, in 1691, this country joined herself to Austria!"

"It was called Yndaia before that?"

"Yes. The Vajda-Maros are older even than their castle. Before that was built the family dwelt here in the city, in the watch tower opposite."

"It is a very old building," remarked Miss Purdon with a shudder. She added abruptly, "Had you ever any witch-burnings in this city, I wonder?"

"Ah, yes, indeed we had. Witchcraft was rife in this unhappy place at one time. The stake used to be set up, I have heard say, just there, where you see the fruit-stall with the brown awning, below the shrine of the blessed Ildemund. When I was born, a woman was living in this town whose grandmother saw the last witch burnt."

Miss Purdon shivered. "Come in, Camiola; it grows a little chilly."

As they went upstairs she remarked, "Those Orenfels people are a little creepy, I think."

"Perfectly delightful," murmured Camiola, who was rapt in the consideration of the curious circumstance of her having dreamed of the dragon as issuing from the door of the watch tower. Common sense caused her to

admit that, previous to her dream, she had heard the hint or suggestion of such a creature from Irmgard; nevertheless, she had known of no connection between the Vajda-Maros and the ancient building in the square.

"Mizpah," said she, "would you like to sleep in my room to-night or in Marston's? Hers is a nice room, and does not look out upon the square. I am sure she has not been disturbed."

She made the suggestion, hardly expecting it to be accepted, but to her surprise Miss Purdon jumped at it.

"Oh, don't think me a weak-minded idiot, but I really think I will take Marston's room," said she. "You heard what he said about the place where they put up the stake? It was something more than an ordinary dream. I can explain to Marston that the sounds of the town awoke me too early in my own room."

The new arrangement was easily made, and proved quite satisfactory. Miss Purdon slept soundly, and so did Marston.

Camiola herself was more restless, for they had found a message awaiting them upon their return to say that Irmgard's mother was worse—had, in fact, experienced a serious relapse.

No supernatural visitations broke the English girl's rest, but the very natural anxiety which a real affection will induce. She loved Irmgard dearly, and she had had but little love in her life. She felt as if she were living through each hour's suspense and strain with her friend. She remembered with anguish the grief she had herself endured, watching by her father during the never-to-be-forgotten night whose morrow left her orphaned.

Next morning she told Herr Neumann that her interview with the Graf von Orenfels must wait. She was going in the motor to Szass Lona at once to obtain the latest news.

Miss Purdon accompanied her, and together they slipped down the foldings of the road, leaving the mediæval city far above them, and when they had rounded the curves of the Trollberg, as the big grass hill at the foot of the valley was called, she felt as though she were in a different world.

The news that awaited them was very serious. The doctors had given up hope, and it was feared that the end was now merely a question of hours.

The children clung about Camiola, tearful and wretched. Even Conrad, his Anglophobia forgotten, rested his curly head upon her knee and broke into loud weeping.

Camiola, as she soothed them and sorrowed with them, was inwardly facing the idea that Irmgard could not now, in any case, leave these helpless creatures in order to go round the world with her friend. The projected tour faded into dim distance. For the present Camiola felt tied to Ildestadt, to the neighbourhood of the girl to whom she was so sincerely attached.

She could not speak of her new plans to any of the Maldovan family—their trouble loomed too large for consideration of anything else at the present time. She felt that, as things stood, she could be of little use, since the children might be summoned at any moment to take a last leave of their mother, and Irmgard could not be spared from the sick-room.

Camiola, therefore, took her departure, promising to send down Reed with the car that evening, to hear the latest account and to hold himself in readiness to go to Hermannstadt or elsewhere, as the General might possibly require his services to drive his aide-de-camp upon such business as should prove necessary.

They returned to the Blaue Vögel to lunch, and afterwards a message was sent across the square to the watch

tower to ask if the Graf could see the English Fräulein upon the question of letting the castle of Orenfels.

Miss France had a queer sensation of being in a dream as she and Miss Purdon crossed the market square diagonally and made for the little arched entrance.

As the door slowly opened, it was without surprise that Miss France encountered the wide, fixed gaze of the old woman who had stared at her so eagerly on the evening of her arrival. As their eyes met, she experienced a shudder, as though she peered down into the depths of dark water. Without speaking a word, the old creature signed to them to follow, and led the way along a narrow stone passage. The door through which one now entered was evidently only a postern. The main doorway had been upon the upper floor, with a drawbridge or movable ladder. The stair by which they ascended was spiral, though not so narrow as the usual corkscrew staircase. It was deeply worn by the treading of many feet, and not very clean.

The stair terminated in a square space forming a kind of ante-room. It occupied one-fourth of the area of the square keep, and it was hung with arras, and sparsely furnished in the style of the country, with sofas and little tables with gilded legs. It had two doors besides the narrow one in the corner by which they had entered.

Here they waited for several minutes—perhaps, as the girl suggested, to make them realise the importance of the nobleman with whom they had come to treat.

Presently the door at right angles to that by which they had come was pushed open, and a little, bent, shrivelled man entered. His hair was grey and thick, standing up all over his head as though some fright had left it permanently erect. He was shabbily dressed, and bowed nervously, standing at some distance from the

ladies, as though he feared they might insist upon shaking hands in English fashion.

Camiola, in her somewhat slow but correct German, presented Miss Purdon, and then, seating herself, avowed her object without preamble. She had seen that the Castle of Orenfels was to be let, and would like to take it for the rest of the summer—say for three months—as she wished to remain within reach of her friend, the daughter of General Maldovan.

The old man looked as though her appearance and manner were pleasing to him, but he raised a knobby, skinny hand and cut her somewhat short.

Then, speaking in a curious harsh German, which was evidently not his native tongue, he explained that he was not prepared to let the castle for so short a term.

Camiola begged to know the shortest time for which he would consider an offer, and he replied that he would, under ordinary conditions, not let except to a permanent tenant, upon lease, for seven, fourteen or twenty-one years. However, as summer was half over, and he had not this season succeeded in letting, he was prepared to accept a nine months' tenancy, if she would undertake to vacate next May, at the commencement of the tourist season, or, in the alternative, renew her tenancy for a longer term.

Not merely was his accent vile, but he was also not well furnished with teeth, and as Camiola was but partially acquainted with technical terms, it took them some little time to understand each other.

When she clearly understood what he was asking, Camiola declined the offer. He must see that she would not wish to remain at Orenfels when the snow came. She would go away for the entire winter, and to return for a week or two in the spring would not be worth while. He looked so anxious and disappointed upon this that she thought she might as well ask what rent he demanded for

a year's tenancy. He replied that he asked five thousand krone, but pointed out that he could not let to her for a year from now, as this would spoil next summer too.

Camiola, utterly surprised at the smallness of the sum asked, then made him an offer. She was willing to pay two thousand five hundred krone—that is, six months' rent—for three months, with the option of taking on the castle at the end of that time for next season at an additional three thousand.

After some demur, he agreed to this. In fact, he seemed to have some trouble in concealing his inward satisfaction. He asked if she was prepared to pay down a thousand krone upon the signing of the agreement, and to this she willingly gave her assent, adding that General Maldovan would gladly satisfy him of her eligibility as a tenant, and would read over the agreement for her, as she was not very conversant with German business idiom.

On this, he asked after the health of the Frau Generalin, and expressed concern upon hearing the serious news. Then, after some hesitation, he went on: "I suppose you have realised that there are not many modern conveniences at Orenfels? I ought to say at once that I am not prepared to spend any money upon it. If you take it, you take it as it is."

Missa France said that she thought she was prepared to agree to that, but would let him know finally after a further visit of inspection. If doors and windows had no fastenings, she would have to ask him to make that right; but if the place was thoroughly weatherproof, she would not require more. He replied eagerly that it was to his interest to have the place kept wind- and water-tight, as he could not afford loss either by weather or burglary. "Though there are no robbers here," he added.

There was further hesitation, and he brought out something else.

"I ought to have said before, at the beginning of our so agreeable interview, that I must make one stipulation, and that is that you retain the services of the Eslers. They know how to make the place safe, and are responsible people. I should, if you kept them to please me, be prepared to pay half their wages."

"We should wish to keep them," said Camiola, "and your offer is very fair. I think it will be best to engage most of our staff from this place, as foreign servants would perhaps not be comfortable. Then there is the question of mules. I suppose we must have a couple to go up and down with our provisions, as well as good ones for ourselves to ride."

He thought that they would have no difficulty in hiring mules or asses for the rough work in the town, and after some deliberation he offered to allow them to hire the two they had ridden the previous day on two conditions —first, that they undertook not to use them as pack mules, and, second, that Erwald should be engaged to look after them.

Camiola was just in the act of agreeing to this arrangement, most convenient to herself, when the curtain was once more drawn aside, this time with impetuosity, and there strode into the room a young man in full uniform, booted and spurred, who was beginning to speak when he stopped short upon seeing the ladies, looked apologetic, and bowed low, bringing his heels together in the approved foreign fashion.

"I did not mean to interrupt you, uncle," said he, half laughing, half as if he expected a scolding.

He was certainly a fine young man, very tall and well drilled. His hair was chestnut, bright chestnut, yet just not incurring the charge of being red, and his eyes were brown, of a warm shade that matched his locks. His

moustache was stiffened at the ends and his teeth white and well kept.

"May I be permitted to present my nephew, the Herr Captain von Courland?" quavered the old Graf.

The introduction was made with proper ceremony on both sides, and the splendid apparition remained standing at Camiola's side, regarding her with a mixture of interest and amusement, as if wondering that a lady of wealth should be so simply arrayed. He could not know the price one must needs pay for a coat and skirt cut and made as was her simple white serge; nor that the ninon blouse within, apparently so loose and comfortable, was the work of a modiste of genius. He was able to decide that neither the thread-like gold chain she wore, nor its pendant of uncut turquoise, was costly. Her hands were hidden in her rough gauntlets, and she wore no other visible ornament. The delicately curved brim of her hat—which also was studiously simple—hid part of her face from him, but he thought what he could see was pleasing. The elder lady was the first to speak, and she asked if he resided in Ildestadt or was there on a visit.

He was delighted to inform her that he was only here on leave, paying a visit to his uncle and aunt. He added that it was really delightful to find visitors in the place; it was usually so dull. He could not understand why it was that people did not flock to Ildestadt, for really there was scenery worth looking at up in the Ildegebirge. Had they been as far as the summit? No? Merely as far as Orenfels? Oh, they had not seen any of the really beautiful part. He hoped they would not leave without doing so.

Then Camiola joined in, and said that, so far from leaving, they intended to explore the place to its uttermost, and that, with that intention, they were about to become the Graf's tenants for a time.

He showed his pleasure at this news in a manner which was almost boyish. He thought they proved their wisdom by coming to a place so wholly free from trippers. If the weather continued fine, they would have a glorious time up in the mountains. He wished that they had arrived a month earlier, but although June in his opinion was the best time to be at Orenfels, yet they had still the greater part of July, and the whole of August would be lovely.

He became eager to advise them upon all sorts of subjects—where to get what they wanted, and so on. In a quarter of an hour they were all talking fast, while the old Graf sat in his chair and gazed at them.

The ladies were anxious to get a few rooms prepared for themselves and their maid at the earliest possible moment, as they found the nights oppressively hot down in the city. It was Miss France's intention to order her butler to come out from England in order that Reed, the chauffeur, might have a compatriot. He could bring out silver and linen with him, but they must go and purchase a small quantity of both in Hermannstadt, also those baths to which the English are so notoriously addicted! There was a merry light in Captain von Courland's eyes as he implored them to believe that, among the upper classes in Austria-Hungary, the views held upon that subject were as orthodox as they themselves could possibly desire.

He was certainly a taking young man, and was ready with suggestions for their household. He declared Bertha Esler to be an excellent cook, and recommended them to place the household arrangements under her care. She would certainly know of girls to do the house and kitchen work; he felt sure they might trust her for that.

Furthermore, he knew where they ought to order their wood for fuel, and before they were aware he was offer-

ing to ride up to Orenfels that very afternoon and warn Bertha of their incoming.

"She won't be pleased," smiled Camiola. "She is a very exclusive lady, and both she and her nephew seem to be anything but fond of strangers."

"Nephew!" said the captain, turning to his uncle. "Has Bertha got a nephew up there?"

"Yes. Her husband died the winter before last, and it was lonely for her by herself," replied the Graf. "A man is needed to do odd jobs, and this young man seems capable."

"I didn't know she had a nephew," remarked the captain.

"Well, there are things that even an officer in the Austrian Army doesn't know," observed the Graf with the ghost of a smile.

"So it seems," admitted the young soldier with a laugh.

"It is too late," said Camiola, "to go up to Orenfels this evening. It must be nearly four o'clock. You would not be back much before nine. Besides, I think I must go myself in order to run through the rooms and make terms with Bertha. She may decline pointblank to work for a stranger! How would it be if we rode up there quite early to-morrow morning? That would leave time to rush to Hermannstadt in the car during the afternoon to buy things. We might start at seven o'clock and be back by twelve. If the weather is good and the Herr Graf will let me hire the mules, an early ride would be delightful."

"Oh, my dear child, I do not think I am equal to starting at seven!" cried Miss Purdon reluctantly.

The captain's eyes sparkled. "Uncle, will you ride up with Miss France and myself to-morrow morning?" he cried eagerly.

The old Graf bit his lip, glanced at his nephew, and

after a momentary hesitation said that he would. He would order the mules for the time desired.

“Excellent!” said Camiola. “The Eslers will see that I come with due authority to invade their solitudes! Perhaps, also, Captain von Courland, you will have the great kindness to accompany us to Hermannstadt in the afternoon and show us the best shops?”

He was only too delighted, and when they had taken leave of the uncle the nephew accompanied them across the road, gaily accepting an invitation to come in and drink tea, made English fashion, from English tea, by an English maid.

His visit was terminated only by the return of Reed with the car and the latest bulletin from Szass Lona. Frau Maldovan had made a partial rally, and, though the doctors were convinced that it could not be lasting, the acute pressure of anxiety was for the moment removed.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MOUNTAIN TRAGEDY

THE party which set out for Orenfels next morning, in the early stillness, consisted only of Camiola and the captain. He brought profuse apologies from his uncle, who, it seemed, was crippled by a very sudden attack of gout. He hoped Miss Purdon would consider that Erwald was chaperon enough for the two young people.

The *solitude à deux* was a far more thrilling circumstance to the young man than it was to Miss France, daughter of a country where Mrs. Grundy is kept in her place.

Otho von Courland had never ridden with a girl in his life before, and the knowledge (which his early training caused him to recollect continually) that this was an heiress contributed to make him feel curiously excited. He had, however, the good breeding to suppress such feeling.

As they threaded the solemn aisles of the pines their good beasts moving steadily upward, crushing the aromatic pine twigs, amid the call of the birds and the murmur of the torrent, sometimes muffled, sometimes close beside their path, Camiola thought that the beauty and mystery of the approach to Orenfels were even greater than she had before supposed.

They had partaken of coffee and rolls before starting, and Erwald carried only some sandwiches for their refreshment upon arrival, as they intended to lunch at the inn upon their return.

They talked all the way, the captain beginning by complimenting Camiola upon her German, and she retorting by telling him how unwise it was of his countrymen not to learn fluent English, since it is the language of so vast a race. Thence they proceeded to talk of the Vajda-Maros family, and Camiola remarked upon the sadness of the accident which had bereft the old Graf of his son.

"Not a son," said von Courland, a little embarrassed. "My uncle never had a son. Gaspard, who was lost, was my brother."

Camiola begged his pardon hurriedly, feeling really grieved at having touched too lightly upon such an intimate subject.

"There is no need at all to apologise," replied the young man cordially. "Our relationships are a little puzzling, as is the case with many old families. My uncle, the present Graf, was an only son—at least, the only one who lived to grow up—and had two sisters. Of these, Hélène, my mother, was the younger. She married an Austrian officer, Colonel von Courland, somewhat to her brother's indignation. He looks always upon Transylvania as a province of Roumania unjustly enslaved by the dual Empire. For many years Gaspard was my mother's only child. He was fifteen when I was born, so I really knew but little of my brother. By the time that I was old enough to understand things he was grown up. He lived here a great deal with my uncle, who looked upon him as his heir; but I am sorry to say that he had a way of running through money which was disastrous. It is, of course, difficult for a young man with a prospective title, in a crack regiment, to live economically; but poor Gaspard's debts were inexcusable. As you have heard, he was killed in an accident, not far from here, and the things which came to light afterwards made people suggest that he might have put an end to himself intention-

ally. That is, of course, absurd, since even if he had meditated suicide, he would not have been likely to drag eight or nine other people after him."

"Oh, that is quite out of the question, of course!" cried Camiola. "What a strange accident it seems to have been. It sounds so wholly unaccountable. Would it be indiscreet to ask if you have any theory about it?"

"My theory is," was the prompt reply, "that no exhaustive search was ever made, the reason for which is, in my view, to be found in the incurable nature of the local superstitions. Have you ever heard of the celebrated Black Dragon of the Ildenthal?"

"Yes, I have heard of it," she replied with interest; "but our good landlord seems inclined to pooh-pooh the idea, and is very unwilling to speak of it."

"You will always find that in every place in which the folks have an inveterate belief in something of which they are more than half ashamed. For all that, I guarantee that there are not more than a couple of dozen inhabitants of Ildestadt—and not one in the surrounding villages—who does not believe that the missing tourists were devoured by the Black Dragon."

"I fancy I was told that the Black Dragon inhabits a certain cave or hole known as the Gaura Draculuj?"

"Yes, and that is what makes the whole story so foolish and incredible. The Gaura Draculuj is a horrible, dangerous fissure of unknown depth, which it was the fashion for the guides to show to visitors. I may say at once that the shape of it precludes any idea of there being a living creature at the bottom of it. As it happens, however, the place was not in the programme of the party which started out that eventful morning, in charge of the two best guides in the district. Their destination was the Kulm—the summit of the pass, you know—and thence they were going to what is known as the Trolls Brücke, which would

bring them back by a different route to the hotel, past the Trollzähner Falls. The falls, by the way, are well worth seeing."

"We will go there as soon as possible."

"When they did not return that evening search parties were sent out, first to the summit, and then to the Trollsbrücke, which is a dangerous place on account of the friable nature of the rocks. It was supposed that there might have been a landslip, which precipitated the whole party into the torrent. I must tell you that during the preceding winter there had actually been a considerable landslip on the road to the Kulm, and the guides were always a bit nervous in the early summer, the whole place being so riddled with caves."

"Is it known that they went as far as the Kulm?"

"Yes; that is quite certain. We know that they arrived, and in good time, because they had lunch there. In that spot—the highest point of the route—the only trace of their proceedings was found—some empty bottles under a cairn and other remains of their meal. It was thought that, tempted by the fact of having got so far so easily, they might have gone on over the Pass down on the southern side. Search was made there all the next day, as well as at the Trollsbrücke. Nothing at all was found."

"No signs of a landslip or avalanche?"

"None at all. Then they examined the Gaura Draculuj, thinking the party might have changed their plans, since in gaining the Trollsbrücke one passes not so very far from the entrance to the cave. On entering the cave it was at once evident that nobody had been there. The rock underfoot is covered with soft, fine, grey sand, and this was absolutely undisturbed."

"That is proof, is it not?"

"Conclusive, even if it were not for the fact that it is

quite absurd to suppose that a party of nine could possibly fall down that place accidentally. Even if you grant that one or more of them may have done so, it is unthinkable that all the rest could have followed. Supposing that some of them got into difficulties—that others, going to their assistance, were dragged in after them—even then they must have had the sense to despatch somebody for help. They could not *all* have fallen down a crevasse and left no trace; and even had they done so, they would have left ropes, alpenstocks, or impedimenta of some kind behind, would they not?"

"It seems certain that they would."

"No! They could not have disappeared like that, nor yet at the Trollsbrücke. There are deep pools there, but absolutely no sort of reason why a set of people in full possession of their faculties should fall with one consent into the torrent in broad daylight. Had they done so, hats and so on would have floated—some trace of them would have come down to the town, would it not?"

"Indeed, one would think so."

"The fact is that they never went near the Gaura Draculuj nor the Trollsbrücke. They left the path somewhere near the summit, and some projecting piece of rock broke off with them, or some snow bridge gave way under them, carrying them all down into the abyss."

"But surely some trace of such a thing would be visible?"

"Not necessarily, if they got up as far as the snow. Gaspard was with them, and he was foolhardy. It was early in the summer, and the snow was very rotten. That very night fresh snow fell upon the heights. It is probable that this new snow fall deluded the search parties. The Trollzähner, as they call the jagged peaks up there, are full of deep cracks—veritable death-traps. To my mind, the giving way of something upon which they were

all standing, and their precipitation, bag and baggage, into some deep fissure is the only conceivable explanation."

"That or the Black Dragon," said Camiola pensively.

"But," cried Otho, "even if you grant that there exists in this valley a prehistoric monster, capable of devouring a man—you cannot concede the possibility of his wiping out a whole party, not one of them, even the hindmost, escaping to tell the tale!"

"The interesting detail in this story to me," observed the girl, "is to ascertain what the creature lives upon when there are no men to be devoured?"

"Badgers and marmots, I suppose, with an occasional sheep. I ought to tell you that they lowered a man on a rope a good way down the fissure—and on a ledge of rock they found the bones of a sheep. That helped to keep up the idea of the monster's existence, though, clearly, the sheep had fallen down accidentally. Poor old Hoffman, who had sunk all he possessed in the building of the Kur-Haus, went out of his mind on the subject. He declared, in face of all evidence, that the Dragon had devoured the tourists. The unhappy old man is now in the asylum at Hermannstadt."

Camiola made an exclamation of pity. "But you say it was shown conclusively that the accident could not have happened in the Gaura Dracului?"

"That matters nothing to our peasantry. They think the dragon quite capable of sprinkling fresh sand over his parlour floor."

The girl shuddered. "It is a horrible, melancholy story," she sighed.

He dropped his voice to a very confidential tone. "Have you come to turn the tide? To change the luck of the Vajda-Maros?" he asked softly.

It was a daring thing to say, but he said it in just the right way. His voice was singularly charming—you felt

certain that he sang tenor. Camiola was keyed at that moment to respond to the call of romance, for as he spoke she lifted her eyes, and saw before her the grey majestic pile of Orenfels lying mysterious and as though asleep in the morning sunlight.

“For ten generations,” went on the persuasive voice, “the succession has never been in the direct line. There was a prophecy that this should be so. According to the terms of the prediction, the curse should have worked itself out in me.”

“Are you the only representative of your name?” she asked.

“So far as we know. There may be a half-English member of the family, but I do not think there is. My mother’s elder sister made an unfortunate marriage. She fell in love with an Englishman named Westonhaugh—a Predikant: what you call clergyman. He was very poor. She ran away with him to England, and it is not known what became of her, for her family cast her off. If she had a son, he would be heir before me. I hope, however, that he does not exist.”

“Oh, so do I!” cried Camiola impetuously, before she had time to think. Then she blushed, and they both smiled.

“The Fräulein is very kind,” said Otho, raising his hat.

Camiola looked around her at the newly mown pasture, where she had seen the haymakers but two days previously, and where, among the stubble grass, the autumn crocus was already beginning to show its beautiful lilac hue. She smiled as she thought how speedily her “Auf Wiedersehen” had come true!

CHAPTER IX

TAKING POSSESSION

IT took Erwald quite a long time to summon Bertha to the gate. He rang, knocked, and shouted for ten minutes, until, growing impatient, he pushed up the shutter, leaned in as far as he could, succeeded in unlatching the door of the porter's lodge from within, and admitted himself, disappearing into the interior, and leaving the two young people unchaperoned in a fashion of which the gentleman at least was acutely conscious.

Otho dismounted Camiola carefully, and together they stood, contemplating the castle; only his eyes were fixed, not upon the building but upon the young girl who so enthusiastically admired it. She was prettier than he had supposed—really quite pretty, he told himself. Pretty enough to fall in love with—almost! And with all that money! It seemed as if Fortune, which had always treated him so ill, had suddenly turned and flung a gift from the skies into his hands.

At last they heard the key grate in the little door which was cut in the big gate, and Erwald, stepping out, went to take the mules in charge.

Frau Esler, flushed and evidently much disturbed, stood in the courtyard, and faced the two who entered with a conspicuous lack of welcome. She gave the curtest of recognitions to Camiola, and curtseyed to Otho with an air of being anxious to box his ears.

Otho greeted her kindly, though negligently, and asked if Erwald had told her that the Herr Graf had let the

castle for a time to the English Fräulein. She answered "Yes" between tightened lips, and, after a slight hesitation, crushing a corner of her apron in her nervous hands, she muttered that she could not think why any rich young lady should want to come up there in such a lonely spot, with nothing to amuse her, and an old house with no modern conveniences.

Camiola smiled. "I think it the most beautiful place I ever saw," she answered, "and you know you do also, don't you, Bertha?" It was mischievously said, and the woman flushed as though furious at being so intimately approached by an almost stranger.

"Please don't be unkind to me," went on Camiola, very gently, "for you will never have a tenant who will be as anxious as I am that all the beautiful things here should be kept carefully, and even better than they are now."

"Yes, *mein Gott!* Foreign servants!" cried the woman, as if she could not control herself.

Her outcry, though strangled almost at birth, gave Camiola her cue. She explained forthwith that she did not contemplate the enormity of foreign servants, with the exception of her own maid. She wanted to put the arrangements into Bertha's own hands. They had been told that she was an excellent cook, and while in Transylvania the English ladies wished to live according to the customs of the country. Would Bertha undertake the duties of cook and housekeeper? She named the sum which she considered appropriate for such service.

Bertha stood very still during her speech, and grew quite pale. It was evidently wholly unexpected, and a few tears slid suddenly from her eyes, to be hurriedly wiped away. "I do not expect that I could please the likes of you," she muttered; "I am out of practice. Be-

sides—besides, there is my boy—my nephew, Eric. I must go with him."

Otho dashed in at this point, to explain that the Graf had stipulated for the employment of both her and her nephew.

"If you had waited a minute, instead of flying at the gracious one like a wild-cat," he said, in tones of annoyance, "I would have handed you the Graf's letter. You are a fool, Bertha; you don't know when you are well off."

Bertha took the letter, and with a murmured "Excuse me" read it carefully through. Her eyes, as she raised them to Camiola when she had finished, showed that she had surrendered. She was not pleased, but she was submissive.

This accomplished, Camiola plunged into business. She hurried off with Bertha to inspect blankets, glass, china, and such-like commodities. She went through the bedrooms with the eye of the *hausfrau* who wishes to supply deficiencies, and wrote down upon a list all the things she thought it likely they might want. After a time, during which the surprising news had had time to sink into Bertha's mind, she reverted to the subject of service, and found, as Otho had predicted, that the woman thought she could easily find maidens to do most of the work. "You will not, however, be able to converse with them," she explained. "They speak no Saxon. In Ildestadt most of the tradespeople are Saxon; but here on this Alp all are Roumanian, and I know not how you will manage at table."

Camiola explained that she was writing to England for her own butler.

She found that if she brought back a little bed linen, some spoons and forks, and one or two other indispensable things in the motor from Hermannstadt, they could be sent up early the following morning upon pack-mules,

with her own personal luggage; and if fires were lit at once in the rooms they were to use, it would be possible to sleep—actually to sleep—to-morrow night in her own hired castle!

Bertha respectfully begged her not to ask to see the kitchen that morning; by the time the Herrschaften arrived it should all be cleaned up and ready. But, as the gracious one would understand, it was at present her living-room and in some disorder. She took her new mistress along the wide passage which led to it, however—the kitchen in use was in the Tudor wing—and showed her a pleasant room which the maids could use as a servants' hall. Camiola also discovered, with relief, that they were not quite so badly off for bedrooms as she had supposed, not all the resources of the house being displayed to visitors.

Although she did not thaw at all in manner, there was a sensible diminution of Bertha's hostility as they went on, and she told where in Ildestadt the best sugar, flour, potatoes, soap, blacklead, and so on was to be had. Camiola asked her to make a list of such things as she should immediately require, and she would take it down to Ildestadt and see that it was all forwarded at once; the Graf himself was seeing about the pack-mules for her; in fact, she believed that Erwald had already procured them. Bertha said that eggs, milk, butter, poultry, and even meat, were to be had from the peasants upon the small alp where Orenfels was situated. Paraffin for lamps was the great thing required. The lamps themselves could be better procured in Hermannstadt, but the oil must come up at once on a mule from the town.

Never had Miss France felt so businesslike and so interested. The question of ways and means was one which had not, so far, entered into her life. It was quite thrill-

ing to fancy the changes she would work in the place in the course of the next few days.

When all was arranged she went to the window of the dining hall and called to the Captain, who was loafing, with his cigar, in the courtyard. Bertha, as on the previous occasion, spread a cloth upon one end of the long table, and set out their sandwiches, with a big jug of milk.

“Oh!” cried Camiola, as von Courland entered, “is not this fascinating? I look upon everything with such a different eye to-day! On Monday I was a mere visitor, now I feel like an owner.”

Her companion felt much inclined to ask whether she would like to make such an arrangement as should secure permanent ownership to her, but this he knew would be, to put it mildly, premature. He contented himself with assuming a sympathetic, though half bantering, attitude, and addressing her as Madame la Châtelaine.

“How is Bertha behaving?” he asked.

“Wonderfully well. I am full of sympathy for her. Can you not feel how unwilling she must be to make such a complete change in her habit of life? Just think how calmly, how evenly her days must roll by. And what a change is coming for her when I ask friends to come and fill my empty chambers! When she is used to it I dare say she may enjoy it after a fashion, but at present it must be a shock.”

“You are going to give her far too much money,” he remarked.

“No more than I should give to a good cook in England. I am making her responsible for the running of the whole show, you must remember. By the way, I wonder where her nephew is? Such a peppery youngster! When he showed me over the place the other day I told him I was coming again, and he earnestly advised me

not! I had been shown everything—everything, he assured me. I should like to see his face when he finds that his aunt is saddled with me for an indefinite period!"

Her laugh rang gaily out.

Von Courland, seated on a corner of the table, laughed with her. He felt absurdly ready to laugh and be gay. He had often heard of the straightforward *camaraderie* of English girls, and had always thought that he should dislike it. Now he took back all such prejudices. Had an Austrian girl been in his company under present circumstances they would by this time either have embarked upon a serious flirtation, or been bored and constrained. No such thing had now happened. He was, so it seemed, at the outset of a most interesting friendship, with a companion who could not be called lacking in feminine charm, yet who gave him no openings; who, in fact, seemed without an effort able to restrain him from becoming personal. It was borne in upon him that the kind of conversation which would appeal to the maidens of his own race would seem an insult if offered to Camiola France.

"Have some more milk," said his hostess encouragingly. "I am glad to find that you can drink milk. I always understood that Austrian officers had wine for breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper."

"One does get silly ideas into one's head about other nations," he returned thoughtfully. "I always believed that all English girls had projecting teeth and enormous feet."

His eyes were fixed, pensively, upon the neat brown shoes which were visible below his companion's skirt.

"I always heard that Austrian officers were so eaten up with conceit that it was quite impossible to talk to them."

"My mother always said that English women were the worst housekeepers in the world, yet here are you arrang-

ing to keep house in this wild spot as competently as if you had the Army and Navy Stores round the corner and electric light fitted all over the house."

"We must become the pioneers of a better understanding between the two nations," began Camiola, and then stopped short, uncomfortably conscious that this was something which might well be construed as an opening. "I mean," she went on hurriedly, "that dislike is usually based on misunderstanding."

"If you are going to found a Society for the Encouragement of Friendly Relations, please let me have the honour of being the first member enrolled," he said merrily; and the friendliness of her glance told him that he had taken the right tone, and scored a point with her.

"This notion of race hostility is so foolish," he was beginning, when there came to their ears the sound of a whistle, sweet and full—a very exceptional whistle. The performer seemed to be approaching the half-open front door from the courtyard, and was whistling the air of the "Pilgrim's Chorus" from *Tannhäuser*.

Another moment and the door was pushed a little wider, to admit of the entrance of young Esler. He wore a grey flannel shirt, open at the throat, and a pair of corduroy breeches. In one hand he carried a tray, upon which were placed three vases, of different shapes, filled with flowers artistically arranged. In the other hand, which hung at his side, was a bird-cage containing a fine canary.

He was so amazed at the sight of the two who sat there eating lunch that he stopped dead just inside the door, and his whistling ceased as though a hand had been clapped over his mouth. The colour flew to his brown face, and he stood there confronting Camiola with an expression so arresting that for a moment—just a passing moment—she felt afraid. The mere fact that she was sen-

sible of that curious quailing caused her to smile mockingly as she said to him:

“Well, I told you it would be *auf wiedersehen*, did I not?”

His whole manner and expression changed in one swift second from something like a challenge to the polite indifference of the servant. So complete, so rapid was the change that Camiola felt a fool, as though she had imagined a totally different person from the young peasant who said quietly:

“Good morning, gracious one.”

That was all. Inclining his head in humble recognition of the presence of the Captain, he walked across the room, passed through the door leading to the kitchen wing, and, setting down what he carried just without, closed the door behind him and was gone.

Camiola sat staring at the oak panelling which had shut him out.

“He has not forgiven the gold piece,” she was saying to herself. As if it mattered what he thought!

“Is that Bertha’s nephew?” asked von Courland.

“Yes; he is a very competent guide to the place. He showed us over when we were here the other day, and if we had time he should do it again to-day. But we must be off, if you are ready. We have not a minute to lose, and must make the best of our way down if we want to lunch and do our shopping also.”

He was quite ready and full of alacrity. Together they went out into the silent, sunny courtyard, and through the little door, where Erwald and the mules awaited them.

Neither Bertha nor her nephew was to be seen, and they were quickly mounted and off, Camiola saying, in the worried voice of one with the cares of a household upon her shoulders: “Now, I wonder if I have forgotten anything really important?”

As they came to the corner, previous to entering the woods that lay below the Alp, the girl turned her head backward and flashed a final glance at her Castle.

“When next I come it will be to stay!” she cried, as if addressing the grey pile.

As she spoke a big white cloud eclipsed the sunlight for a moment, producing a curious illusion, as though the fortress frowned upon her. She took herself to task for idle fantasy; but in some obscure way the passage of young Esler through the dining hall had blunted the edge of her satisfaction.

CHAPTER X

“CHILDE ROLAND TO THE DARK TOWER CAME”

ABOUT four o'clock the following afternoon the mule cavalcade, consisting of Miss Purdon, Miss France, Marston, Reed and Erwald, emerged from the wood and took their way towards the Castle.

Marston was, as has been shown, a self-possessed person, but she did hate muleback, and her English heart did sink at sight of the remote spot in which her eccentric young mistress had elected to pass her holiday.

Camiola, on the other hand, could not repress her delight. She felt as though, in achieving her purpose, she had trampled down an opposition none the less real because impalpable. Her haste to leave the Blaue Vögel was increased by the fact that Miss Purdon, although sleeping in Marston's room, had been troubled last night with another affrighting vision, induced, as the girl supposed, by their temerarious intrusion into the Watch Tower itself.

They had duly accomplished much shopping in Hermannstadt the day before; had dined there, and, returning between nine and ten o'clock at night, had stopped the car at Szass Lona, Miss Purdon and the Captain waiting while Camiola went in to make inquiries. Frau Maldovan was still alive, and that was all that could be said.

Camiola had her agreement with her, and the General, who was sitting in his study, willingly read it for her. He said it was a fair agreement, advised her to sign it, and himself witnessed the signature.

Irmgard, looking sadly wan, crept away from the sick-room to give her friend one kiss, and her father informed her that Camiola had taken Orenfels for the rest of the summer.

Irmgard broke down into tears at this news.

"I have been dreading—dreading every day to hear that you were going away," she sobbed, clinging to Camiola. "It has turned so hot, and I knew it must be stuffy at the Blaue Vögel, and each time I saw you I thought it would be the last. Now you are fixed at Orenfels, and though it is a good way off, still you are within reach. We can have news of each other, and I feel that you are near, which is such a big consolation."

Camiola held her close, whispering words of sympathy and comfort, mingled with assurances that she would come whenever summoned, and do anything to help. Then, as her friends were awaiting her, she said good-bye and slipped away, cheered immensely by Irmgard's approval.

"I thought," she told Mizpah, as they sped towards Ildestadt, "that she would think it too far off, but she doesn't. If I were going to be here longer I would have a telephone installed. That would make things easy. But it would be a business getting those wires up the hill."

At daybreak a whole string of pack-mules had gone up to the Castle carrying luggage, bedding, and many other things. Camiola was eager to see what Bertha had accomplished in the way of preparations. She had yesterday selected the rooms they would occupy—the oriel for herself, a room adjoining for Mizpah, and a small one across the passage for Marston.

This time there was no need to knock for admission. The little door in the gate stood open, and within could be glimpsed a litter of straw and empty cases. The legend, "Zu Vermiethen" had been removed, and "Eintritt, 1

Krone" no longer appeared above the little shutter in the porter's lodge.

This trifling change was pleasing to Camiola, and it was with light feet and heart that she stepped over the bottom of the gate and entered her domain.

"I wonder," said she aloud, "if we could get the big gates to open? They look as if they had not moved on their hinges for centuries."

This matter was not, however, urgent. She hastened forward up the curved steps and entered the dining hall.

She uttered an exclamation of keen pleasure.

The whole place had been, as it were, miraculously polished in one night. The old oak shone. Huge logs blazed upon the hearth, and, hot as it had been in the town below, the fire seemed pleasant here. Bertha had produced and laid down fine old faded Persians rugs, which she usually kept rolled up in cupboards. There were flowers upon the glossy table; and a huge tabby cat, finding a soft rug and a warm hearth, had curled herself up to sleep in a manner which suggested domesticity and comfort.

Upstairs ran the happy, excited Camiola and peeped into her drawing-room with the oriel. Here, too, was the delicious, acrid odour of wood fire—here, too, the floor had been covered with rugs, some Oriental, some of wolf-skin and bearskin. Here, too, were flowers and cleanliness.

In the bedrooms the same order prevailed. Things had been unpacked and put in their places as if by the hand of a good fairy. Miss Purdon could not believe her eyes: and Marston heaved a sigh as she laid down her mistress's travelling-bag with the remark:

"Well, miss, I will say as things might have been a deal worse!"

Camiola, laughing, hardly waited to hear her, running

down again fleetly to find Frau Esler and express her satisfaction. Meeting on the wide oak stair a couple of rosy girls in curious-looking frocks, she divined that these were members of her new household, and gave them greeting in a manner which caused them to blush and beam and run away in an access of unbearable shyness.

Just as she entered the dining hall Frau Esler also came in from the kitchen entrance. Camiola poured out her pleasure and satisfaction with many *prachtvolls* and *reizends*. The gloom upon the good woman's brow did seem to lighten a little at this spontaneous tribute.

"I am glad if the *hochwohlgeborene* is pleased," she said primly. "I was coming to ask if I should send up tea to the drawing-room?"

"Yes, please," Camiola agreed with satisfaction; "that will do beautifully."

"I also wish to say," went on Bertha, with the air of much disliking her message, "that, as the young girls are far too shy to wait upon you, and your own servant cannot be here for several days, my nephew will bring in your supper. I am aware," she added hurriedly, "that in future the Herrschaften will dine late in the English fashion, but for to-day I have been so busy that I have only been able to prepare supper for them."

"You have worked wonders," replied this complaisant mistress, "and supper will do quite well for to-night, until our silver and things are here. I shall be much obliged to your nephew if he will help as you suggest, and, of course, I will pay him well."

The final words seemed to wipe out the good effect made by the rest of her speech. Bertha frowned heavily as she turned away with a curtsey; and when she frowned she was really a very forbidding-looking woman. She turned back at the door to ask at what hour they would like to have supper served. Then she went out.

When they had explored upstairs a little, the two ladies repaired to the drawing-room, where they found a small table placed in the oriel with tea neatly set out.

Reed and Marston, both very uncomfortable and wholly on the defensive, were despatched to the society of Erwald and the new maids in the servants' hall.

"They will soon learn a few words, or insist upon teaching the others a little English," said Camiola. "It is awfully good for them all. Oh, how glorious the sunshine is here! What a prospect! Just look at Ildestadt! It is like the enchanted city in a fairy tale, or a bit of the Middle Ages cut clean out and put here for our joy and satisfaction. See the old walls, zigzagging up and down hill, and the darling little pepper-pot towers! I can just descry the low, dumpy battlements of the Watch Tower, Mizpah."

"Don't show it to me! I want to forget it," replied the lady with a shudder. "I have just remembered what it makes me think of. It is exactly like the Dark Tower in 'Childe Roland.' "

Camiola, seated in the window with the westering sun making a halo for her hair, clapped her hands gaily together. "Mizpah, you are clever," she declared, and proceeded to quote:

*"Burningly it came on me all at once!
This was the place! . . .
What in the midst lay but the Tower itself?
The round squat turret, blind as the fool's heart,
Built of brown stone, without a counterpart
In the whole world!"*

"That's it, of course. Only this one is square, not round—but blind and squat! Oh, yes, it is the place, and all the brave adventurers of the ages have been lost there—

have gone in, yet never come out, as you saw in your dream. But that has not been our fate, Mizpah! We at last are the fairy prince! I wonder whether there is a family prophecy about us! I must ask Captain von Courland. He says they had a curse laid upon them that nobody should inherit in the direct line for ten generations: and nobody has."

"Now don't, I beg of you, Camiola, go making me feel creepy when I am just beginning to breathe more freely," said Mizpah, half laughing, half vexed.

"Creepy? It is not creepy! It is just delightful! Captain von Courland says I have come to turn the family luck," cried the girl. "It is simply fascinating. You know how, in the old adventure stories, everything conspires to prevent the rescuer from approaching! Dogs with eyes as big as mill-wheels guard the treasure, leaping flames make a circle round the sleeping maiden, thickets grow up on the hill-side and shut out the palace from view! I feel as if that is so with me, and I can't just tell you why. I have had no difficulties—I have secured my castle with very little trouble; and yet I feel as if there had been forces working against me, as if there were somebody hostile, somebody who wanted the old place to stay desolate, who is against me in an odd way which I cannot yet discern."

She spoke dreamily, her eyes upon the rose-garden below. "It is all so like a story," she murmured. "I cannot somehow believe it to be real. These gardens are like the illustrations for 'Beauty and the Beast.' I could fancy a horrible creature lurking behind the bushes, who will approach when I pluck a rose and tell me that by my simple action I have given myself into his power! Heigho! I wish I wrote stories, Mizpah! What a place this would be for a novelist, only perhaps he would say: 'Really, I think the local colour is laid on almost *too*'

thick. A modern audience wouldn't stand this—what?"

Miss Purdon had to laugh at her swift mimicry of a certain modern novelist who lived in terror of putting anything into his work which would involve the use of his readers' imagination.

"How you do run on, Camiola! And the other day Mrs. Archer said to me, 'Miss France seems a nice girl, but she is very silent, is she not?'"

Camiola laughed contentedly. "Poor old Mizpah, you'll never get any credit for all you have to endure. Now I am going upstairs to insist that Marston forthwith produces writing materials, and I am going to write to Uncle Arnold and to Neville to come at once. I shall also command Neville to bring Betty with him. I am sure that she and Captain von Courland will get on well together, and she has quite a creditable *dot* into the bargain. She can bring a maid; there are plenty of little funny rooms where we can put maids. Oh, dear, these gardens do beckon me, but I will be sternly virtuous and write my letters first. The *Briefträger* starts off down the hill at five o'clock these summer mornings, so they tell me, when there are any letters to carry. He will be worked off his feet during the next month or two, will he not, poor soul?"

She opened the door and left the room, singing to herself.

Stepping from the drawing-room door, one stood upon a square landing; opposite was the door of the long gallery, approached by a flight of four oak steps, curved, like the stone ones in the courtyard.

The gallery was the pride of the castle, and was panelled in its whole extent with finely carved wood. In the panels were some family portraits, not of a high order of merit, but good enough to be interesting.

Along this gallery walked the new mistress, humming

softly to herself, and passed out into a farther landing, whence opened her own room and Mizpah's.

She found Marston at work unpacking—evidently the difficulty of communication with the foreign maids had cut short the coffee drinking.

Finding a charming table in black wood with elaborate carving and claw feet, Miss France sat down and wrote her letters. When she had done, and had superintended Marston's arrangements, it was time to change her dress.

Marston had laid out a rose-coloured ninon, and though she thought it rather full dress for the occasion, she would not put her maid, who had had a hard day, to the trouble of producing another. She sat down to have her hair arranged before a glass in a frame of black carved wood—a glass which had in all probability reflected the faces of the ladies of the Vajda-Maros for two or three centuries. Its merits were more of the artistic than the practical order, and she had to consult her own hand-glass for details.

Nevertheless, she loved that mirror, and determined that it should be brought from its seclusion upon the darkest wall of the room and placed before a part of the big mullioned window upon the table which matched it. There was another handsome table in red lacquer which she could use for her writing.

She was charmed with her room, and was anticipating, with shivers of delicious apprehension, how she would feel when lying in that huge bed under that dignified canopy. Miss Purdon had insisted upon a modern bed, and the fine old four-poster from her room had been moved into another: but Camiola felt as if, to taste the full flavour of her castle, she must sleep in the appropriate bed.

At seven o'clock a horn blew, and the ladies, rightly supposing that this was their dinner bell, looked at each

other and laughed. "Childe Roland again," said Camiola mischievously.

As she descended the slippery oak stairs, the girl felt rather incongruous—her soft, vaporous draperies were, she felt, not the right thing. It ought to have been brocade; that would stand alone when you stepped out of it. Before the sideboard, exactly facing her, stood young Esler, watching her advance. He was attired in the full costume of the Ildenthal—and very becoming it was. The snowy shirt, cut very full, served as a tunic, hanging in folds to the knees, and held in at the waist by a broad belt of scarlet leather. Below were tight trousers, or leggings, of white cloth. The whole effect was extremely picturesque.

As her eyes met his she encountered the resistance, the challenge, of which she had before been sensible, and because this vexed her she dashed into talk.

"How funny to have no doors at the foot of the stairs! I think we must import a big screen, otherwise, when the weather turns cold, we shall be blown away!" said she to Miss Purdon in English. Then, in German, to Esler: "What are these funny little low gates for at the foot of the stairs?" she asked.

"They were to prevent the dogs from going upstairs," replied the young man with a start. "Many dogs were kept, and they used to be allowed in the dining-hall, but no farther."

They seated themselves, and he put before them clear soup with tiny balls of potato in it. It was quite excellent.

This was followed by a plate of carefully sliced sausage, garnished with delicious salad. Fried veal cutlet, served with green peas, was far more delicate and better cooked than at the Blaue Vögel. The sweet was a compôte of mountain raspberries served on hot toast, and the

coffee which brought the supper to an end was without reproach.

The young man moved silent-footed and very deft. They could hear a few smothered giggles from the girls who were bringing things to the door for him and carrying them away. Except for that, the whole meal, both as regards cooking and serving, could hardly have been better.

Secure in the fact that the young man understood no English, they talked freely, expressing their satisfaction at their change, both of lodging and of cuisine, and strolled out into the garden, in the twilight, feeling more at home and far more comfortable than they had dared to foresee.

CHAPTER XI

THE GARDEN CAVE

AFTER supper Mizpah put up her feet upon the cushiony window-seat of the oriel and prepared to be lazy with a book.

There was a restlessness upon Camiola born of excitement. She longed to savour to the very utmost the sensation of being mistress of this castle.

Going to her bedroom, she fetched a cloak, in case the mountain air should be sharp, and, opening the door which led from outside the dining-hall to the terrace at the back, she stepped out into the windless beauty of the early summer night.

Night you could hardly call it. The west still glowed with the fires of sunset, though in the east the stars were appearing. The fragrance of the roses hung heavy over everything, and in the stillness the sound of rushing water could be heard distinctly, though not loudly, like an accompaniment to the evening hymn of creation.

Twice or thrice she strolled round the bowling green, and then, encouraged by the warmth and dryness of the air, she began to descend the winding paths of the slope down into the lower parts of the gardens, where she had not previously walked. It was not unlike the hill-side terraces of the Villa d'Este at Tivoli. The same period of taste had produced both. There were surprises as you turned corners: grey stone fauns, their pedestals clustered about with creepers or hidden by clumps of fuchsias, and a delightful gold-fish pond, embroidered with water-lily

leaves, and presided over by a marble nymph with a renaissance smile—a charming bit of sculpture and design.

At the garden end, not very far from the wall which bordered the lowest part of the grounds, the rockwork of the beds was curved aside, leaving room for a marble seat with carved arms and a back which sloped most restfully.

Here Camiola seated herself. Her back was towards the valley, and she faced an almost vertical bit of rough rock, over which the cistus or rock-rose clustered thickly in all shades of lovely colour. The ivy-leaved toadflax flung down fairy garlands to veil the boulders, and here and there the fiery tropaeolum made blazes of glory upon the grey face of the rock. The path down which she had come passed along the top of this steep bit and curved sharply down on one side, in a loop, to the place where she sat. She could hear the slow drip of some tiny runnel, falling rhythmically from the top, but she could not see where it fell.

Ah, she was glad—glad from the bottom of her heart—to have left the close atmosphere of the mediæval city and to be up here upon the free mountain side! She raised her eyes to the heights. Not much was visible from her position, but she could see one or two of the lower peaks, and she smiled at them as she whispered, “I am going to climb, to come quite near you, perhaps to stand upon your very summits!”

Lost in dreaming she sat there, no breath of wind reaching the charmed spot. It was so full of fragrance, of quiet, of beauty, that she thought it would be lovely to bring out cushions and an eider-down quilt and sleep here in the garden. By degrees, as she grew more and more still, her ear, accustoming itself to the tinkle of the dripping water, began to be conscious of another sound.

It was like a muffled rattling or shaking. It was intermittent, sometimes being prolonged, sometimes in jerks. It was so faint that had any other noise competed she could not have heard it. In the present stillness it was just audible. She supposed it to be made by some small animal, scratching in the grass near, and amused herself by trying to locate it. Then, while she was listening quite eagerly—for it seemed to come now from this side, now from that—it ceased, and was followed by a faint reverberation, as though some one let something drop a long way off or from beyond some barrier.

Instinctively she looked behind, but nothing was to be seen. It occurred to her that she was perhaps hearing some echo from the town so far below, carried up by a trick of acoustics. She heard several more faint, booming sounds, as of things being moved about, and was just going to rise and go nearer to the wall behind her in order to listen, when a movement in front of her caught her attention and made her jump horribly.

The creepers which veiled the rock at its base parted in the midst, and young Esler came, apparently, out of the rock itself.

He was in the shadow, and at first she could not see who he was, for he wore a sheepskin coat over his white costume. She sprang to her feet in a hurry. The young man, on the contrary, could see her plainly—her dark furs, rose-coloured robe, and sparkling shoe-buckles being all plain in what light there was, and also in the rays of a lantern which he carried, which shed a most brilliant light.

“Oh, how you startled me! Where did you come from?” she cried, with a little laugh of relief, when he came forward and she saw who it was.

“I am very sorry, gracious one. I did not know you

were there," he replied in his tones of most frigid disapproval.

As always, this attitude of his roused Camiola to assert herself. Why should she not walk in her own garden? "There is nothing very strange in my strolling in the garden, I suppose," she said sharply.

"Nothing, of course," he replied impassively, turning away to walk up the path.

"Wait!" said Camiola with some sharpness. Then, as he turned back, "What were you doing there? Is there a cave?" she asked.

"A very small one, gracious one. I keep my gardening tools there."

"Your tools! Do you keep these gardens in this beautiful order?" she asked, astonished.

"I have two men to work for me," he answered.

"Let me see your tool-cave," she demanded impulsively.

He glanced at her dress. "In those clothes?" he asked doubtfully.

She laughed. "That won't hurt!"

He made no further demur, but held aside the trails of passion-flower, and, when they had fallen behind them, she saw by the lantern's light a little door.

He put in a key, turned it, and admitted her to a small cave. It contained various flower-pots, a wheelbarrow, and some gardening tools; hanks of bass and packets of seed were ranged in orderly fashion upon shelves.

The space in the midst was not very great.

"Not much to see," remarked Esler dryly.

Upon the wheelbarrow there rested a round sifter, such as is used to sift ashes. The barrow was half full of silver sand. On the ground beside it were a couple of small sacks, evidently full of the same sand.

"What do you use the sand for?" she asked idly, for the sake of saying something.

"To mix with soil which is too heavy," he replied.

"You were sifting it just now—I could hear you, and wondered what it was," she laughed. He made no reply. "You work late," she added.

"I have some potting to do to-morrow," he answered.

"Well, thank you, for gratifying my curiosity," she said. "This is a very nice cave. It would be handy if I were caught in the rain. Why do you keep it locked?"

"My master's orders," he replied shortly.

It was not until they were outside and had proceeded some way up the hill towards the castle that she remembered he had so held the lantern as to light up the immediate foreground only, and to give no idea of the extent of the cave.

Her mind did not, however, dwell upon this, which was only in keeping with the proud peasant's general air of fixed resentment. She did find herself wishing that she had not hurt his pride by insisting upon his accepting her gratuity. But, after all, what did it matter? His feelings were nothing to her.

It was all forgotten in the delight of disrobing and going to bed in her state chamber. The communicating door between her own room and Mizpah's was left open, in case the latter lady might sleep badly or feel nervous; but when the morrow dawned both of them had slept without once rousing.

Camiola was in such spirits that she danced in and out of Mizpah's room all the time she was dressing, with chatter and nonsense. She opened her casement, hung perilously out to gather roses from the wall, sang snatches of songs, and declared herself ready to kiss the very stones of the castle which she loved so dearly.

Captain von Courland rode up from Ildestadt in time for lunch, and it was a very festive meal indeed. The mountain mutton proved to be excellent, and there were

some little birds to be caught by the dozen, rather like sand-grouse, which Frau Esler dished up most temptingly. The cream, the butter, the wild raspberries were all good, and it seemed that whatever happened they would not be starved at Orenfels.

Throughout the meal Esler waited upon them, sullenly but efficiently.

It appeared that Captain von Courland had taken to heart what Miss France had said to him about learning English. He was most anxious to begin, but could find nobody in Ildestadt competent to teach. Camiola volunteered to try. It was arranged that the young man should come regularly twice a week for this purpose.

After lunch they had coffee upon the bowling green, and Frau Esler produced a box of bowls, with which they amused themselves very satisfactorily the whole afternoon, winding up with an English lesson, in which the pupil covered himself with distinction, and it appeared that he had learned something at school which purported to be English, but feared to venture upon experimenting with his meagre knowledge.

Camiola promised to write to England for an advanced primer, and when he left in the sunset to ride home he felt that during that day he had made excellent progress.

Reed had spent the day in going down to Ildestadt, getting out the car and running it to Szass Lona for news. He returned about eight o'clock in the evening with the news of Frau Maldovan's death.

They were, of course, not unprepared, but the last bulletin had not led them to expect the blow to fall quite so soon. In fact, the final rally had been so surprising that a faint hope had arisen that the patient's fine constitution might triumph after all.

Camiola was plunged into deep grief. Loss of parents was the trouble which she herself could most easily un-

derstand. Her reserved but sympathetic nature lived over again the horrors of her own times of bereavement. She passed a restless night, and awoke next morning in deep depression.

She had her coffee and rolls in her own room, put on a black frock, and ordered Erwald to be ready with her mule early. As she came down the stairs, her heavy eyelids, white face and mourning garb made her look a completely different creature from the young girl who had run about the gardens so merrily only yesterday.

Esler was standing at the bottom of the stairs as she came down. She averted her eyes and would have hurried past him, but his voice detained her. It was more gentle than she had yet heard it.

“Pardon, gracious one, there are many white flowers in the garden; I thought perhaps——”

She stopped short. “Oh!” she broke in, and she smiled, though the tears sprang to her eyes afresh. “How good of you, how kind of you, to think of that!”

She saw then that he carried a basket and a pair of gardening scissors.

“I did not like to cut them without permission,” he murmured deferentially, “but if you will come with me, it would not take long. The lilies are just at their perfection.”

He led the way to the terrace, along it, down some steps at the far end, into a little square pleasure-enclosed by yew hedges, to which she had not hitherto penetrated.

All the flowers which grew there were white. The tall Madonna lilies filled the air with perfume. He cut them with a lavish hand, adding the drift-white Frau Karl Druschki roses, white stock, pyrethrum, antirrhinum, jasmine. She was deeply touched, and, when her basket was filled, she ventured, quite shyly, to ask whether he would

make a wreath for the funeral, which was to be two days later.

He consented readily, though he said it would be his first attempt, and that she must therefore forgive shortcomings. They parted more amicably than ever before.

When she returned that evening she brought Hilda and Conrad with her. Conrad was a nervous, highly-strung boy, and his unrestrained indulgence in his grief was doing him harm. Death had not previously come near him, and it was terrifying to his vivid imagination.

Camiola was beginning to love him, and it was sweet to see how tender she was with both children. She sat by Conrad's bed that night until he slept; and during the whole of the next morning she kept them out of doors in the garden quietly amused. She planned a picnic luncheon on the bowling green, and found Esler not merely ready but eager to carry the food out of doors and to do all he could to contribute to the completeness of the arrangements.

After lunch, with the new timidity which the knowledge of his young mistress's sorrow seemed to have bred in him, he suggested that perhaps the young Herrschaften might like to go over the cave.

This was a very bright idea, and it had not occurred to Camiola, whose mind was preoccupied with the thought of what Irmgard was going through during these days.

The children were covered up in overalls, she exchanged her black for a very short tweed skirt, and they plunged into the old keep stairway in much excitement. Neither child had ever been in the cave before, though they had often heard of it. They chattered all the time about the Black Dragon, on which subject Esler was not communicative.

Conrad wanted to know all about it—where it lived,

what were its habits, whether it was likely to appear in the castle, and so on.

Camiola and Esler combined to pooh-pooh this last idea. To begin with, said Camiola, there was no dragon; it was only a foolish old story; but even if there had been it was nowhere near the castle, nor had it ever been seen anywhere within miles of it, even in the old days when it was supposed to appear.

“Tell us about Saint Ildemund, who killed the dragon,” said Conrad, when they were all seated on a rock near the subterranean stream, eating chocolate and drinking the clear ice-cold water.

The boy was snuggled close against Camiola, whose arm was round him, her cheek resting upon his curly hair. Esler, seated upon his stone close by, replied: “Well, according to the legend my aunt has told me, the old saint went to work so sensibly that it really almost sounds as if the story were true. He did not get any sword or spear, or anything of the kind. You have seen his picture on the shrine, and also on the window of the Frauenkirche in Ildestadt. What has he in his hand?”

“A thing that looks like an anchor,” replied Hilda, who was a very observant child.

“Yes, Fräulein, but it is not an anchor; it is just a pick-axe,” replied Esler. “The story says that the people were in great tribulation, because the dragon lay in wait for sheep and oxen, and even men, and caught them. He inhabited a certain cave, not so very far from the little cell in which Ildemund himself lived. The saint’s cave was so small that he was quite safe when he was inside; the monster could not enter, and it feared the daylight, and only came out after dark. The saint made a practice of keeping early hours, and was safe in consequence. But the people came to him and implored him to get rid of the dragon for them. So he thought and thought, and

prayed and prayed, and at last he saw how he could do it. He got a lantern and he went and hid, somewhere in the bushes above the mouth of the dragon's cave; and when the beast came out that night, he went in and made a thorough search of the horrible place. He found plenty of blood and bones and evil-smelling refuse, but he also found out what he wanted to know, which was that there was no way out of the cave except by its mouth.

"So he called some of the head men of the village, and told them to drive a fat bullock up the mountain, and, after the dragon had gone out at night to find food, they led the poor bullock inside his cave, for him to find on his return. That night the dragon searched everywhere and could find nothing to eat. All the time he was away the saint and his helpers were busy with their pickaxes, chipping round and round a huge mass of rock which overhung the mouth of the hole. Just as dawn broke the inhabitant of the cave came home, and he was roaring and howling with hunger and rage. Inside he found his breakfast, a very large breakfast, and they knew that he would not come out again for at least three days. So they worked and worked away until they loosened the huge crag, and it fell and blocked up the cave mouth completely. Then they called all the village in to help, and they piled up rock after rock all over and around and about the opening, until nobody could tell that there ever had been an opening there. They also brought cartloads of soil and scattered it over and among the stones. The dragon was very strong, but not nearly strong enough to shift all those tons and tons of rock and earth. So he never came out any more."

"He was dead, I suppose?" said Conrad.

"No doubt," replied the young man gravely. His capable fingers had been at work all the time he was telling the story cutting out the hull of a tiny boat, which he now

set to float upon the water of the stream. This was a new thrill for Conrad, who insisted upon having it rigged. The boy had some thread in his pocket, and Camiola produced some white paper. With matches for masts, Esler contrived some rigging, and they all grew very friendly over the business. Camiola thought the dragon was forgotten, and would be left to rest behind his impassable barrier of rock; but before long, à propos of nothing, Conrad inquired:

“Eric, have you ever seen the dragon?”

“Why, Master Conrad, all that I have just told you happened five hundred years ago!”

“Then you think the dragon really was dead?”

“There cannot be a doubt of it.”

“And you have never seen him?”

“I have only lived up here for about seven months, little Herr.”

“Oh! Where did you live before that?”

“A long way off. See this tiny whirlpool, how it sucks in the boat; she ought to have a keel, I think—a bit of lead. Perhaps I could find you a bit.”

“Oh, do, please. Who told you about the dragon and all?”

“My aunt, Frau Esler. She knows many tales. She has lived here all her life, and her parents and grandparents before her.”

“Then you think it is all nonsense to say the dragon is alive now?”

“All nonsense! Certainly.”

Conrad’s sigh was a compound of relief and disappointment. It is sometimes difficult to say whether a child most loves or fears horrors.

The following day Irmgard’s mother was laid to rest in the graveyard which lay below the great old church of St. Ildemund.

The service was very beautiful, and Camiola kept ever after a vivid memory picture of the scene. It was a boisterous day, of brilliant sun, warm wind, and a sky of rolling fleecy-white clouds and deep, vivid blue. The scarlet cassocks of the acolytes stood out against the cypresses behind, to which the old town walls made a grey background. The incense drifted upon the brisk air, and the pathetic boy voices were tossed about fancifully by the playful breeze.

Camiola, kneeling between Irmgard and Conrad in the midst of the little heart-broken group of children, felt as though she were one of them, and as though the glorious prayers and anthems were for her, too, who had lost more than these orphans.

The sorrow was drawing them all together in a way in which even joy cannot do. It was making Camiola feel that she had a share in their lives, and that Orenfels was, in some subtle sense, her home.

The two children returned with her to the castle after the service, as this allowed Irmgard more leisure for what lay before her—the labours which seem the most cruel of all: the tidying up and putting away of the possessions of one who so lately had all these things in her own capable hands.

Conrad dried his tears as they left the city behind, and, when they had climbed as high as the shrine of Saint Ilde-mund, desired to be shown the traditional site of the mouth of the dragon's cave.

Esler, who had attended the funeral, and was on foot, lifted him from his mule, and then Hilda and Camiola also desired to go. After a short climb they found themselves facing a bit of rocky hill-side, very quiet and solid-looking. It was difficult to suppose that the boulders had been heaped artificially to make it.

“If I were the lord of Orenfels, I would have it opened

and find out if the bones are there," remarked Conrad after a prolonged silence.

"So would I, little Herr," replied Esler, somewhat to Camiola's surprise. "But the lord of Yndaia rules this valley no more; nor will, until the curse be lifted."

CHAPTER XII

THE QUEST OF MRS. COOPER

OH, Betty, it is nice to see you; how charming you look, and how suggestive of London!" cried Camiola, warmly greeting her cousin.

They stood together upon the elementary platform of the Ildestadt station in the valley, the visitors having just emerged from the train. Neville looked as though he needed a holiday badly; while Arnold Bassett, in his tweeds, was quite at home abroad, if the expression may be pardoned, and gazed about him with the keen air of one who has seen much and does not mean to admire the mediocre.

"Miss Purdon has not come down to meet you; it is such a fatigue for her," went on Camiola eagerly. "I must warn you that you have still quite a long journey before you to reach the eyrie where we are perched! I hope you won't feel your hearts faint when you first see the spot to which you have to climb!"

Erwald was in attendance with the pack-mules to carry up the luggage. A subordinate was with him, who would take charge later, when, on the return journey, the travellers should exchange the motor for mule-back in Ildestadt.

The Thurlows and Mr. Bassett thought they had never seen Camiola so animated. She had a fine colour, and seemed in the best of health and spirits.

When the motor had rounded the Trollberg, and the view of the Ildenthal burst upon them, they were really almost as enthusiastic as even the hostess could desire.

She hastened to point out to them the turrets of her castle, which, seen against the dense black background of the stone pines, looked like carven ivory.

"Are you all hungry?" she asked. "I hope so. I have ordered lunch at the inn in Ildestadt, and I have asked a young man to meet you. He is very handsome, and he is the future owner of my castle—Captain von Courland."

"Hallo, Camiola!" said Bassett softly, glancing at his late ward with raised eyebrows. Camiola did not mend matters by blushing scarlet. Betty and Bassett exchanged looks. Neville, though he heard, carefully averted his head and seemed absorbed in the beauties of the road. His heart had given a great upward leap. If there was really somebody else in the way, his people could not blame him much!

After a minute he leaned forward to Camiola and said in a low voice:

"I suppose that Fräulein Maldovan is feeling her mother's death very much."

"Yes, deeply. However, I am delighted to say that she is coming to stay with me at Orenfels next week, so I hope to be able to cheer her up. The children have been invited to go, in charge of their governess, to stay with their grandmother, who lives somewhere on the Italian Riviera. The General is going away for a three months' tour with a friend; his health is very much shaken. The house at Szass Lona is to be shut up, and I hope to have Irmgard staying here all that time. Her little brother Conrad is with me now—such a darling boy. The grandmamma does not like boys, so he could not go there, and he is as happy as the day is long at Orenfels. Oh, I do hope I shall be able to make you all comfortable, but it is a queer old place!"

They were now approaching the mediæval walls of Ildestadt.

"It looks like a fairy-tale town!" cried Betty. "It makes me think of the Pied Piper. Oh, can't you fancy the children pouring out through this gateway, towards the bridge over the river!"

"Yes, exactly!" cried Camiola eagerly, feeling more drawn towards Betty than ever before. "The whole place never seems quite real somehow, and the legends are weird. I must tell you some of them."

The car drew up at the Blaue Vögel, and there stood Herr Neumann, with a beaming face of welcome, and Otho von Courland in a distracting uniform.

He came forward with empressement to help out the ladies, and Camiola at once presented him to her cousin.

Betty Thurlow was a fair girl, and certainly pretty. She wore a pale-blue frieze travelling suit, with white hat and shoes, and looked as dainty as though she had never slept in a train in her life. Otho's English had made steady progress during the last ten days, and he was able to say, after a bow of which Betty had never seen the like:

"How do you do? I hope you have made a pleasant journey?"

Greatly relieved, she replied that she had, but that the last bit in the motor was much the most lovely.

"How well that you my country admire," he answered, greatly flattered. "The Fräulein France, she will not go anywhere till you are come. She reserve all the expeditions that you may also go."

Full justice was done by the hungry young people to the abundant lunch provided for them. Bassett, good linguist and seasoned traveller, soon gained the confidence of Herr Neumann, and praised his wine in so discriminating a fashion that the innkeeper's heart went out to him. The Transylvanian wines are of astonishing excellence, and of an exquisite amber hue like liquid topaz.

So overjoyed was the host to find an expert so appreciative that he insisted upon decanting, at his own expense, a bottle of a very special white wine from the far-famed vineyards of the Kokel Valley, in order that everybody should drink the health of the young English lady who was bringing trade and prosperity to the Ildenthal.

Camiola was somewhat taken aback at this proceeding, but more so by the extreme significance of Herr Neumann's words, and his meaning glances towards Otho. "*Hoch, Fräulein—Hoch, Rittmeister von Courland!*" he cried jovially, and added a fervent hope that this beautiful Engländerin had come to restore the lost luck of Orenfels.

Camiola hardly knew where to look, and carefully avoided Bassett's eye. She began to realise that Miss Purdon had been wise when she shook her head over the lessons in English. Of course, the thing was known all over Ildestadt. She had been imprudent, and was vexed.

Otho, however, was learning tact so fast that he perceived her vexation, and also that Herr Neumann must be silenced. He said hastily:

"The luck of Orenfels is already restored, by the mere fact of the Fräulein's presence there. We welcome also her illustrious relatives from England! *Hoch, Fräulein Turlow! Hoch, Herren!*"

Camiola was very grateful to him, and after a moment's reflection, consoled herself by the thought that only Mr. Bassett had understood the landlord's toast. She saw him eyeing von Courland narrowly, and was well pleased that the captain showed no signs of ill-bred self-consciousness. By his whole reception of the situation, he rose in her estimation. For the first time she was thinking.

"He really is a very attractive fellow." And in her heart she was adding: "And he has a very attractive castle!"

After a good rest and a comfortable smoke for the men, Erwald brought round the mules, and Betty was in high delight at their beauty, their fantastic harness, and the strong, forbidding countenance of their guardian.

Camiola was greatly cheered by her pleasure. She had been afraid that Betty was a young person for whom the wilderness would have no joy.

The sight of the deserted hotel on the way up struck Mr. Bassett forcibly, and Camiola thereupon told him part of the story of the Great Disappearance.

"That's a most unlikely story," he remarked doubtfully, when he had heard it.

"Yes, isn't it? If it had not been in Murray, I don't think I should have believed it," she replied.

"You tell me that all these people vanished, leaving no trace, and that no search was made?"

"Oh, no, not so bad as that! Continual search for six months, so I heard, and a special inquiry was held also."

"Well, then, it seems incredible that nothing was found out."

She told him something of the local superstition, and he was so interested that the conversation lasted the whole way up to Orenfels.

He had also much to ask concerning the curious Saxon population of Ildestadt. Like most people, he was wholly ignorant of social conditions in Transylvania, and was astonished at finding German spoken. Camiola assured him that, once outside the town gates, the language would not carry him far.

The day had been cloudy and uncertain, but the sunset was lovely, and Camiola watched with deep anxiety to see the effect which her fortress would produce upon them.

She led them through the little door into her courtyard, with a beating heart.

The doves, of which there were quantities in and about

the castle, were strutting upon the stones, the roses made a glow of many-coloured brilliance on the walls; and Mizpah, stationed upon the semi-circular steps, the open door behind her, showing a gleam of the carved oak within, was a picture of dignified welcome.

There was a chorus of praise as they entered. Forbes, who was now installed, stood smiling in attendance, and was greeted heartily as they passed through the hall. But the outburst of admiration broke forth when they were led out upon the terrace behind.

All was now in perfect order, both without and within. Forbes had settled down wonderfully, considering the shock which his first departure from his native land had been to him, and the curious nature of the arrangements with which he had to be content.

Conrad, in white flannel shirt and trousers, left the game of bowls which Esler was playing with him, and came running towards them.

"Well, Camiola, I confess that I think you were justified. This may be the other end of Nowhere," said Mr. Bassett, "but anything more magnificent than the prospect from this terrace I never saw in all my various travels."

This speech caused profound gratification to the girl. Miss Purdon also was immensely relieved that the dictum of the great man should be favourable. Conrad, with his handsome face and curly head, made a good impression at once. His Anglophobia notwithstanding, he spoke English well, since their uncle, that Admiral who had sent Irmgard to Oxford, held strongly that a knowledge of English was essential to all enlightened European peoples.

It was with high hopes of a delightful summer that the young hostess, after tea upon the terrace, led her guests to the rooms assigned to them. It seemed that each door they passed admitted them to fresh beauties. The gal-

lery, the drawing-room, and the State sleeping apartments were all declared to be perfect of their kind.

When everybody had been disposed of, Camiola rushed downstairs for half an hour's bowls with Conrad before it was time to dress for dinner.

Esler and the boy had finished their game, and were seated together upon the marble bench, Conrad intently watching something which Esler was fashioning for him out of wood. Camiola stood for a minute looking on, and as she did so, Forbes came out of the house upon the terrace, saw her, and came to where she was standing.

"Excuse me, miss, but I should like a word with you about the waiting."

"I'll come," said Camiola, moving.

"No need to walk a step, miss. The young feller can't understand a word of what we say. It was only, miss, that in view of the large number now sitting down to table, I thought you might feel inclined to ask the young feller to come and help me wait, as Miss Marston says he used to do before I got here."

"No, no, Forbes," replied Camiola, smiling, her eyes fixed upon the movements of Esler's deft fingers. "I can't ask any favours of him. It is not his place to wait at table, and it was very kind of him to do it until you came."

"I should have thought, miss," ventured Forbes, with the persistence of an old servant, "that if you was to make it worth his while——"

She laughed, as she slowly shook her head. "No, Forbes, it is out of the question. I offended him desperately the very first time I saw him by offering him a tip. You know you wouldn't have been offended the least bit by any tip that was offered you, would you?"

"I hope I know my place better, miss."

"Very well, then. You can't understand how he feels;

but he was furious. He has never forgiven me, and I don't want to insult him again. He has more than enough to do, keeping these lovely gardens in order."

"Plenty of time to play with the child, seemin'ly," muttered Forbes, not best pleased.

"I don't care whether there is any waiting or not, Forbes; really I don't. We are holiday making, you know. If you like, you may put the vegetable dishes on the table, and let us pass them round. But I am not going to ask this man to help, so please understand."

"Pass round the dishes yourselves! Not if I drops in my tracks!" declared Forbes in wrath, turning and shuffling off to the house at a great rate.

Camiola chuckled to herself, as she sat down beside the boy on the bench, and rubbed her cheek against his curls. "What a lovely boat Esler is making you," she said, relapsing into German.

"Yes, this is really a good one. It is to float on the cave-stream, of course. I am going to send it down from the place where the water comes out, to the place where it goes in!"

"Is it going to be fine to-morrow, Esler?" asked Camiola, a little anxiously. The two previous days had been wet.

"Almost certainly, gracious one. The wind has shifted to the fine quarter and the mercury is rising."

"Good! I hope you will have time to-morrow to come with us to the summit. Captain von Courland is to be with us by eight o'clock, and I think we ought to have you as well as Erwald."

"I can do that very well. Heinrich is well able to do weeding and watering, and I mowed the bowling green this morning."

"Thank you! That is very satisfactory. Will you give the necessary order for me?"

“Gewiss, Gnädigste.”

“Come, then, Con! Only just time for our game before I dress!”

They ran off together, while Esler rose from the bench and walked away. The dressing-bell took them both by surprise. They raced from the spot whence they stood to the glass doors, and Conrad won by about a foot.

An hour later they all came down to dinner.

They made a nice-looking party, the incongruity of their society toilettes being almost atoned for by its charm. As Camiola came down upon Mr. Bassett's arm, the first thing she saw was Esler, upright and stiff beside Forbes at the sideboard. His Ildenthaler costume looked so delightful, and was so much admired by her guests, that she felt a quick impulse of gratitude. But how dared Forbes communicate the idea to him, when she had expressly forbidden it? The hot colour rose in her face, as she flashed a glance at the butler, who seemed wholly impenitent; and then for a minute her look met that of young Esler, and she experienced the extraordinary sense of surprise—almost of fear—which she had felt when he came in through the open door, carrying the canary, and found her sitting upon the table in company with von Courland.

It was an extraordinary look, an extraordinary power which this peasant possessed. It made her think of primeval things—the strength of the hills, the silence of dawn, the terrors of magic, the mysteries of sex.

Yes, that was it. As she took her seat at the head of the table, facing the place where he stood, she knew that her colour changed, and she resented it. He stood to her for a new thing. He carried in him the suggestion of a power which she had never hitherto felt. It was almost a pity that such a man should mate with Rahula, the hay-making girl, who would be just as content with anybody else. Since the first day when she had disturbed the

haymakers at their work, Camiola had made friends with the inhabitants of some of the châlets near, though their language made intercourse most difficult. Rahula often came to the kitchen of the Castle with milk, butter, eggs and other produce. . . . It was perhaps better for young Esler that he should marry some one quite simple, not capable of being upset by his extraordinary moods. Yet she felt it an injustice that the mountain man should not be provided by nature with a mountain woman to understand him.

She was so plunged in these thoughts that the beginnings of conversation were unheeded by her. When she began to attend, Neville was saying:

“By the way, I suppose there is a solicitor of sorts in Ildestadt?”

“I imagine there must be,” replied Miss Purdon. “The national equivalent for a lawyer must be essential; people want to make wills and so on.”

“I want to combine a bit of business with my pleasure here,” went on Neville. “A client of ours is in search of a runaway wife, and he is pretty certain that she came to Transylvania.”

“But how unlikely! Why should she go to such a place—where strangers are so scarce that she could be easily traced?”

“He has his reasons for the supposition,” rejoined her cousin.

“Is it an interesting case?” pursued Camiola.

“My client is anything but an interesting person,” replied Neville, with a laugh. “What you might describe as a curmudgeon—surly, ill-conditioned brute, named Cooper. Any wife would have run from him, if she had the power of locomotion, I should think. His wife is partly a native of this country, I should tell you.”

“That makes her less easy to trace,” opined the K.C.

"She will change her name and be swallowed up among her fellow countrymen. I suppose she did not run alone?"

"As to that, I have no precise information. He does not seem to want a divorce. She is a handsome woman, judging by her photograph."

"In any case, she would not come to a remote place like this," remarked Miss Purdon. "In Ildestadt everybody knows his neighbour's business, and a stranger is marked down instantly."

"Perhaps," suggested Camiola suddenly, "she was one of the party that was eaten by the Black Dragon."

"She didn't disappear as long ago as that," replied Neville, amid laughter. "No," he added, more gravely, "my chief hope of tracing her is that she almost certainly has no money. It would be to nobody's interest to keep her secret, and old Cooper would make it to somebody's interest to give her away." There was a slight clatter of plates at the sideboard, and Esler stooped with a red face, to pick up the broken halves of a vegetable dish-cover.

He was usually so deft and silent, that Camiola looked up in surprise and saw him scarlet with confusion and annoyance. She pitied him, and sympathised with his mortification, but it was not much noticed, for her introduction of the Black Dragon into the conversation had fastened the attention of everybody upon that fascinating bogey. Camiola gave all the details with which Captain von Courland had supplied her, and added that, as he was to join the party next day, he would show them the various points of interest.

Esler handing peas at the moment, she addressed him, with marked kindness to atone for his slight mishap:

"We should not have time, should we, to go to the Gaura Draculuj to-morrow as well as to the summit?" she asked.

"You would do better to leave that for another day, Gnädigste," was the deferential reply.

CHAPTER XIII

CONRAD'S EXPLOIT

EVERYBODY went to bed early that night, and declared themselves ready for anything next morning.

Bassett, however, gave it as his opinion that the summit should not be attempted that day. It was a hard four hours' climb for seasoned mountaineers, and the mules were of no service after the first hour. If they went, most certainly Miss Purdon, and very probably Betty, would have to turn back, which would spoil the day. They therefore decided to go to the Trollzähner Falls instead, a route, so Erwald informed them, of more magnificent beauty, and only half the distance.

For an hour along this path the mules could go, for it was here that the mineral springs, which were to have supplied the *Kurhaus*, had been tapped, and the scheme for carrying the water in pipes down to the hotel had actually been begun. The difficulty was that the hot spring, the most important of all, lost its heat in being carried so far, and had to be reheated, a process in which it parted with some of its medicinal properties—or so the doctors said.

Nobody but Miss Purdon, however, availed themselves of the offer of a mount. The suggestion of a pack-mule for the provisions was also scouted. The men, including Esler and Erwald, carried *Rück-sacks*, and were well able to take all the food required, including to every man a half-bottle of the topaz-coloured *vin du pays*, which made a delicious drink mingled with mountain water.

The Captain arrived in good time for breakfast à l'anglaise. He was somewhat wonderfully arrayed, according to English ideas, in a green hunting suit, and a hat with a feather, like a Tyrolese peasant. However, his good looks and his style carried off the dress, and Neville thought, rather touchily, that the girls seemed to admire it more than the Harris tweed worn by their own men, which had no charm of novelty.

Neville was a bit out of it that day, since both Betty and Camiola seemed to be attracted by the Captain, and Miss Purdon and the K.C. forgathered persistently. He longed for the arrival of Irmgard, and made use of the time beforehand to court the favour of her young brother. Conrad accepted his overtures very frankly. The good English spoken by the boy made it easy for Neville to talk to him. The gift, later on, of an electric torch from Neville's pocket "for his very own," cemented the friendship with firmness.

Camiola took an early opportunity, after the start, to say to young Esler:

"I hope you do not think that I expect you to help with the waiting at table. I do not know how you came to do it last night, but whoever asked you did so against my express orders."

He looked faintly surprised. "Nobody asked me, gracious one. I thought it would help your Mr. Forbes, so I offered. He seemed pleased."

"No doubt. But it gives you too much to do."

"There is a large part of the year during which I have nothing to do," he replied gravely. "If my health should break down under the strain, I can rest then."

She looked quickly at him, wondering a little at the irony in his words. Surely never did anybody less look like one who is likely to break down. Health itself seemed to have lent the golden brown that tanned his fair

skin. He moved with every muscle aplay under the surface of a body which had no ounce of superfluous fat. He was so well-proportioned and compactly built that he never struck the eye as being a tall man, though Camiola noted with surprise, as he walked beside Neville Thurlow, that he was but a couple of inches short of the Englishman's six feet.

He puzzled her. His aunt, Frau Esler, had married a Saxon, and Eric's colouring suggested a mixed parentage; yet the young man had the Roman profile—like that of an emperor on a coin—which is typical of the Roumanian peasantry.

She had but little time, however, in which to study her servants' moods or appearance. Von Courland claimed her, and when after a while he turned to Betty, Neville was quite ready to take his place at her side.

The Falls were greatly admired by all, even the blasé Arnold Bassett. They were not of any very great height, but they were sheer, and the volume of water which descended was great enough to make a thunder which struck with awe upon the heart. "The strength of the hills," was the thought in Camiola's heart, as she watched that mighty descent.

No special incident marked a delightful day, until evening, when Conrad succeeded in creating a pretty sensation by getting lost.

They had stopped, upon their return, to have tea at the wooden pavilion built and abandoned by poor old Herr Hoffman, to which, in the early summer mornings of one bygone year, the water-drinkers had repaired on mule back, to obtain their water hot and fresh from the source.

The roof of the little place was still weather-proof, and there were iron tables and chairs, which offered so great a lure to Miss Purdon that the party yielded to her en-

treaties, and allowed her to have tea there in comfort. Erwald, already accustomed to the tyranny of tea in the English mind, had brought the paraphernalia of spirit kettles and lamps, in whose use Marston had thoroughly instructed him.

Every one, of course, had to taste the mineral-impregnated water, and every one voted it nauseous, though Mr. Bassett said it was nothing to Harrogate water.

After tea, Conrad ran off to follow the course of the pipes as far as they had been laid. The party was in the midst of an interesting discussion of future plans. They were armed with the best ordnance survey, large scale maps, and they were, under the generalship of Arnold Bassett, deciding upon their next expedition, reference being continually made to the two practised mountaineers, Esler and Erwald.

Nobody noticed the slipping away of the boy. It was not until the men had finished their cigarettes, and had indulged, under Betty's leadership, in a thrilling game of chucking pebbles, to hit a little stone set up on a large boulder, that the signal to move was given.

Then, Conrad was nowhere to be found.

They tried shouting first. All the men in succession exercised the power of their lungs, making the noise reverberate among the rocks. No answering cry or call came to their strained ears.

Esler then ran off down the path as far as the bend, to see if he could descry the boy from afar.

They followed his swiftly moving figure with their eyes until it disappeared, and Bassett, holding his extinct cigar between his fingers, remarked musingly: "How well that chap runs!"

"I was just thinking," remarked Neville, "that he runs like an English public schoolboy. Did you notice the action?"

"Shows how right our system of training is, I suppose — how near to nature. This chap, who has no training at all——"

"Oh, you must be wrong there. He has had his military training, no doubt."

"Ah, no doubt. Yes, you are right, I should think."

Esler reappeared, shaking his head.

"He's found nothing," commented Bassett. "Come on, Thurlow, we will go back, up the road, and see if we can spot the youngster's trail."

They moved off together, leaving Camiola standing tense until Esler rejoined her. He spoke at once. "I think I know where he must have gone," he said.

"I will come with you," she replied hastily. Together they returned down the path a little way, then struck off sharply to the right, downhill, along a scarcely perceptible track, among the trees.

"I think I know where he has made for. I can find him. There is no need, Fräulein, for you to come, it is a rough road," he urged.

"Oh!" cried she impatiently, "you ought to know by now that I don't mind rough road, all I want is to find the boy. I would not have any harm come to him for worlds."

"I know it, *Gnädigste*," he replied meekly, turning to help her down a steep bit.

Soon they were deep in the heart of the wood, far from everybody. The way here was wide enough to admit of their walking side by side, though Esler kept trying to avoid this. "I am almost certain," he explained, "that he has found the quarry where they began to cut the baths. They broke open a cave there, which is still accessible; . . . and this afternoon the English Herr gave Conrad a torch—he has most likely gone in, and it winds——"

"Then, for mercy's sake, be quick!" cried the girl on a sudden note of alarm; and as they ran on she panted out,

"Oh, Esler, tell me the truth. There is nothing to hurt him, is there? There is not, really, on this mountain side any evil creature with power to do harm?"

He turned then, and looked her full in the eyes, with the passionate intensity she was learning to dread. "I wish I could tell you for certain that there is not," he replied, "but before God I am not sure."

She gave a little cry of horror, and quickened her pace. "Don't let us waste a minute."

They ran for nearly a quarter of a mile through the woods, and when her breath failed she grasped the young man's arm.

"We are just there," he said presently, "and I am almost certain we are right. I have noticed several broken twigs among the juniper."

"What a long way for him to run—bad boy," panted Camiola. "Oh, I am so frightened. Do tell me what makes you think—"

"Ah!" he cried. "I ought not to be such a fool as to alarm you. No harm can come to him here, I am fairly sure. Only you asked me the direct question, and I was obliged to tell you the naked truth."

"What makes you suppose—" she questioned breathlessly.

"Poor old Hoffman saw it," he murmured, slackening speed for a few steps that she might get her breath. "He is mad, yes, and, of course, they say he was mad when he thought he saw it. But I cannot help wondering whether it was the sight of it which sent him mad."

"Where did he see it?" she gasped, almost inaudibly.

"In the Gaura Draculuj," he answered in the same tone.

As he spoke, and while her brain hummed with the shock of his words, they came to the edge of the trees, and the edge of the land, too. They found themselves looking

down upon a deep pit, the bottom of which was full of boulders, over whose sides the creepers were already growing.

To their left was the dark hole, showing where the men had knocked through into one of the countless natural cavities of the district, and had therefore been obliged to abandon their work.

Upon a bit of bare rock lay Conrad's alpenstock.

"We are right," cried Esler, pointing to it. "There, do you see? Don't trouble to come down, I will go and shout to him."

"Oh, let me come down," she pleaded. "I can't stay up here. I can get down quite easily; don't wait for me, go on as fast as you can and call to him."

She clambered down with amazing celerity, for she was growing used to the mountain life, and took to it well. Esler obeyed her direction, descended himself in a series of running leaps, and reached the bottom.

He went into the cave and shouted. His voice reverberated, echoed, then grew muffled. Camiola was left outside alone.

There descended upon her a stillness which seemed unnatural.

Birds had ceased to sing, for evening was falling. There was no breeze in the hollow, the bushes hung motionless, the grass was unbent by even the merest zephyr. The sound of running water, to which her ear had grown so accustomed, was silent. No voice from the rest of the party penetrated to break the hush.

It soothed her at first. Then she began to be apprehensive. Suppose that something—the vague something which she dare not name—had been lying in wait in that cave, had killed Conrad, and was now attacking Esler?

How long ought she to wait here alone? What could

be done in the way of rescue should the two not presently emerge?

Was this to be a second disappearance? Were these two creatures, in the very pride of youth and manhood—sound, vigorous, with life stretching before them—to be cut off from the land of the living, and no man henceforth to know what had become of them?

The creeping horror grew with the silent minutes. It seemed to her as if she must cry out, or run, or enter the cavern herself, anything rather than sit there helpless and solitary, with terror in her heart.

She thought of Conrad and his pretty ways, of the glister of his curls, and his stumpy, boyish fingers manipulating bits of wood, of the curve of his eyelashes on his fresh cheek, as he stooped intent over some bit of work. Then she thought of Esler—of his swift, quiet helpfulness, his reticence, his stark pride, his curious fascination. In a moment of angry humiliation she realised that she was thinking more of this peasant than she had ever thought of any young man in her life.

And at the moment he might be dead, or slowly bearing to the cave's mouth the body of a dead boy.

She hid her face in her hands and shivered. Time raced madly on. How much longer could she bear this strain? The shadow of a big boulder in front of her had travelled perceptibly forward, across the moss. At last a sound came to her ears—a sound from far down in the bowels of the earth. It was at first the merest murmur, then she thought she could translate it into a moaning—not persistent, but intermittent—a moaning noise from within there, from the terrible dark places of the earth where, perhaps, some antediluvian monster still lurked, foul and obscene in the darkness and the fetid airlessness of the dim den.

She rose to her feet, and her eyes dilated. Slowly she

moved nearer and nearer, until she stood close to the mouth of the cave, whence something would presently issue into the light of day. The noise grew, ceased, came on again more loudly, it broke into something like a shout. In another minute she distinctly heard a voice.

"Camiola frightened—what rot!" cried Conrad in German. Then, in a moment, he stood before her—such a sight. Daubed from head to foot with whitish clay, clothes ruined, but face beaming with smiles.

"Hallo, Camiola!" he cried blithely, "what did you suppose could happen to me? Here's old Esler been talking to me like a Dutch uncle; says I'm a heartless imp to frighten you so. I say, old girl, were you really so frightened? Oh, you musn't, you know, you really mustn't think I'm dead every time I go out of sight."

For a long moment she could not speak; she could only hold the naughty boy tight. Her breast heaved, her throat swelled with a feeling she could not master.

Esler, after one glance, turned away, and stood sideways, with a set jaw, gazing at the surrounding landscape.

"Oh, Con, you musn't!" she stammered out at length. "These caves are so dangerous. Suppose you fell down a cleft? Please, please remember that I am responsible for you to your father. I am in charge of you. Promise me you won't do it again."

"Of course I won't, if you really feel like this about it," answered the boy wonderingly, "but do try to get over it, 'Miola. I'm all right, you know. Mr. T'urlow gave me a torch, and I could see where I was going. I really am not a kid, you know."

On that she laughed, a little gasping laugh, and recovered herself.

"Come, we must go quickly back, they will all be dis-

tracted," said she, and they moved to the side of the hollow.

It was not so easy to get up as it had been to slide down, and she was glad of Esler's help. Both he and she were silent as they made the best of their way back. Conrad, however, supplied the conversation without effort.

"It simply goes in ever so far—for miles and miles," he said, "and it's only one tunnel, you couldn't lose your way until you come to the queer cavern, a long way on. You have to go down on your knees and crawl, and then you come out in a huge place, and there were most curious things there. I thought at first that they were bones."

"Bones, Conrad!"

"Yes, I felt almost certain that they were. I didn't like it at all, and I was quite glad to hear Esler coming after me. There is a big pond, you know, quite a lot of water, awfully black and cold and silent, and on the edge of the water there were these white things. I picked one up, and it was just like a bone. I thought a sheep had got drowned, but I am not sure that a sheep could have wriggled in where I crept through. I suppose it could, though, if Esler got in. He says they are not bones, after all, they are stalactites—little ones. He showed me one or two up on the roof; one could just see when the torches flashed on them. He thinks there must have been a flood, and some bit of rock gave way and let the water down, and it washed some stalactites off the roof. I wanted to bring away some, but he wouldn't let me wait, he was in such a plaguey hurry to let you know I was safe."

"He was quite right," said Camiola. "I hope you understand, Conrad, that for the future, whenever we are out on the mountains you are not to go out of call."

"Yes. I will remember," he replied, with a sudden touch of remorse. "Oh, 'Miola, please believe that I really did not know you would be frightened."

"I do believe it, darling," she replied, with a hug.

The young man received a more severe reproof from Arnold Bassett when they rejoined the others. That gentleman had been compelled to take a good deal more exercise than he cared for immediately after tea. The party was delayed, dinner would be spoilt, and he was inclined to look upon the boy as a nuisance. Camiola allowed him to lecture, thinking it good for Con to receive a sharp lesson in order that the manœuvre might not be repeated. Her heart was still beating uncomfortably fast, and she shrank from the memory of her thoughts during her solitary waiting outside the cavern.

She sat down upon a stone while the others performed those evolutions which Bassett was accustomed to describe as "getting under way."

Esler brought her some milk to drink, and she was surprised to note how grateful she was for it. As he stood beside her, waiting to take her empty cup, she asked a sudden question.

"Were they bones?"

"Yes, they were," he replied in a tone which, although quiet, seemed to her to hold some hidden excitement. "I thought it better to persuade him that they were not." After a moment's hesitation he added: "Might I ask you not to say anything to anybody? Something has happened inside that cave—I mean, some rock wall has given, and has let down water, and—and maybe, other things, too. I would rather not have it talked about until I am sure."

She looked up at him with an eagerness of interest which flashed in her beautiful eyes.

"Tell me," she asked hurriedly, "could it be possible that those bones were—*human*?"

He replied in the same lowered tones which she had used. "I think there is no doubt of it—no doubt at all."

"Oh!" It was a very excited "Oh!" and after a hesitation she added:

"Is it possible—could they—have been washed down from—from the Gaura Draculuj?"

"It is not impossible."

CHAPTER XIV

TOKENS IN THE SAND

THE following day was unsettled in respect of weather, and as everybody was tired after their journey, nothing particular was planned.

The Thurlows, acting upon Camiola's instructions, had brought out with them from England a complete set of lawn-tennis.

The instalment of the net upon the bowling green, and the marking out of the courts, kept all the party busy.

At lunch time Neville announced that he meant to go down to Ildestadt and back on foot, in order to find a solicitor, or the Transylvanian equivalent. He suggested that if Camiola wanted any message taken to Szass Lona Reed might accompany him, and they could easily run there and back with the car.

This suited Camiola well, as there were details to arrange respecting Irmgard's arrival, which was to be on Monday. Neville accordingly departed, and, the weather being finer, Betty, Camiola, Mr. Bassett, and Conrad played tennis all the afternoon.

Camiola was in a restless, excited mood. The discovery of the previous evening interested her to a degree which surprised even herself. It showed her how deeply the mystery which overhung the Ildenthal, and a desire to penetrate it, had influenced her in taking the castle. The thought was stirring enough to unsettle her completely. If they really had, through the accident of a boy's heedlessness, stumbled upon the key to this enigma, then Oren-

fels would be, for a week or two, in the eye of all Europe. Their seclusion would be done away. Not even the steep road would keep tourists from flocking to see the solution of the problem, which had agitated the press so wildly a few years back.

This was by no means desirable. Even without Esler's petition, she would have kept what he disclosed to herself. Conrad, of course, prattled of the stalactites upon the brink of the water, which had looked like bones; but Esler tranquilly explained that he was mistaken, and showed a few bits of what was most decidedly stalactite, in support of his statement.

If the young peasant's theory were true—if some rock wall inside the mountain had really given way and allowed these grisly relics of a bygone tragedy to come to light, then what followed?

Would it be possible to ascend, from the cave where the bones were found to the spot whence they had fallen? It seemed unlikely, since the catastrophe had apparently taken place at such an immense height above the abandoned quarry. Something of the kind suggested by Von Courland was probably the case. Some footing had given way, precipitating the poor wretches into gulfs of grim darkness and death. One could but pray that their end had been rapid, and not the result of starvation.

In the garden that evening she came across Esler, watering cannas, and began to talk of it at once.

"I can think of nothing but those bones," she said urgently.

Esler started when she spoke to him, and looked up as though disturbed in a reverie. His manner was a little distract, as though he had something on his mind.

"I am thinking of it, too, gracious one. I want to go and investigate, but I am too busy at present to allow my mind to dwell upon the matter. It must stand over for

the time being. Fortunately, nobody is likely to go to the place where the young Herr went, except ourselves."

"Oh, but Esler, if you knew how much I care about it!" she burst out. "I feel as if I simply *must* have my curiosity gratified. If I could find out what became of those people, I should tell myself that I had not lived in vain. Can't we do something?"

He set down his can and gazed at her wonderingly, wiping his hands upon a corner of his gardening apron.

"You really care so much?"

"Intensely. I believe that a desire to find out all about it had a great deal to do with my wanting to take the castle. Now, Esler, tell me the truth. Is there any reason why you do not want me to find out about it?"

She flung the question at him abruptly—unexpectedly—that he might not have time to be prepared for it—that she might surprise the truth from him. He was looking directly at her as she challenged him, and the expression in his attentive face did not change.

"There is no reason," he replied simply. Then his mouth relaxed, and he smiled shyly.

"I will confess to you," he owned, "that I was much afraid the Fräulein's coming would put a stop to my own investigations, which I have been carrying on for some time."

"Ah!" she cried quickly.

"If you are really eager," he went on slowly, watching her face with intentness, "I will do all I can."

She drew a long breath and gazed around her, as if wondering where to begin. "What a pity there are so many people here," she said, with a half-laugh and a shrug. "Whatever is done, I want it to be done secretly. I do not want anybody to know anything about it until we have really discovered something definite."

"I am quite of your mind, Fräulein."

She was struck with a sudden thought. "Frau Esler knows? That was why she was so angry with me for coming?"

He replied with eagerness. "Yes, Fräulein, that was it."

"I knew there was something," she replied slowly, her eyes full of speculation. "I am so glad to find it was only that."

He lowered his eyes and moved a pebble about with his foot. "I will do all I can," he said, with an embarrassment which puzzled her. "Perhaps, to begin with, you would like me to show you something—only trifles, but something."

"Yes, yes, of course—anything!" she answered quickly. "Now?"

"Yes, yes! Now, by all means."

He picked up his can, and led the way down the winding paths, to and fro, till they reached the garden foot, where was the hidden door of his cave. "Wait until I make a light," said he, going in and leaving her outside.

Presently he called, and she slipped under the tangle of creepers and entered.

Within, upon the rough wooden table, there was a lantern, which burned with a strong, clear light.

Esler went to a shelf and took down a box. He set it upon the table near the light, and unlocked it with a little key he took from his pocket.

Inside the box were various very small packages rolled in paper. He unfastened one, and laid upon her hand a circular object about the size of a halfpenny.

"What on earth is that?" she asked.

"I take it to be a button, Fräulein. If you hold it to the light you will see that it is pierced." He unrolled another. A bit of black stick about three inches long

was produced. "That is a fragment of lead pencil," he informed her.

Another package contained shreds of fibrous stuff, which were possibly portions of some kind of fabric, cloth or the like. There was also a bit of bent wire which quite clearly had once been a hairpin; and last and most significant of all, the wire frame of a pair of pince-nez glasses.

That was all.

"You found these?" she asked, gazing at them in wonder.

"I found them in that sand," he replied, pointing to the barrow and the sifter which she noticed on her previous visit. "The sand that you see there was all collected by me from the floor of the Gaura Draculuj. I found the bit of pencil accidentally when I was sitting in the cave one day and pondering. I was stroking the sand as I sat, and my fingers came upon this little hard thing. I examined it carefully, cut off a tiny bit, and found it was a pencil. That set me thinking. I collected sand from round the edges where it was deepest, and this is the result of sifting so far."

Camiola sat on the table, arms locked round her knees, so carried away that she could think of nothing else.

"Then," she said, "this seems to be evidence that they had been there—that it was from the cave that they disappeared?"

"It looks like it. All that is there was certainly once the property of human beings. How it got into the sand is the marvel."

"Well, but," cried the girl, "how could they possibly all fall down a fissure and leave no trace behind? They say there was not even a footmark!"

"I believe that to be quite true, Fräulein. My aunt herself can bear witness to it."

"Well, what *can* be the explanation?"

"At present there only seems one—the one the people hereabouts believe—that there is a monster who lives down there and that he showed himself. They may have been paralysed with terror. He was probably lurking in a recess of his den, so as to take them from the rear. If he drove them into the pit, his huge tail may have swept the sand smooth behind him."

"Esler, you don't yourself believe it?" she cried, almost imploringly.

He hesitated. "I did not at first," he replied slowly. "Up here in the mountains, however, one grows to think that there are strange things——"

He did not finish his sentence. The look in her eyes told him that she understood. They both remained silent for some time, pondering. She was the first to speak.

"We must not let the others go there," said she in a low voice.

"I am very glad you think that," he rejoined, with satisfaction.

"But you must take me there."

"No!" he cried sharply.

She looked him in the face. "You go there?"

"I? That is different."

"Have you ever seen anything unusual there?"

He replied unwillingly: "No-o."

"Very well, then; take me!"

He looked irresolute.

"You could go in first and see that it was safe," she suggested.

"Would you swear to do what I told you the moment I told you? Would you promise, if I said "Run!" or "Stand still!" rudely, as if I were your master instead of your servant, to obey on the instant?"

"Yes, of course. You would be leader of the expedition."

"Very well," he said, after a long indecision.

"But how is it to be done?" she demanded ruefully.
"There are so many of us about."

He pondered. "Did I hear that the old Baron von Orenfels had invited the whole party to lunch at the Round Tower next week?"

"Yes; we have agreed to go."

"Could you have a headache and stay behind?" he suggested. "They will not want me just to go down to Ildestadt. There are plenty of men to look after the ladies and Erwald to stable the mules."

She hesitated. "I could not very well say I was ill and then go out, could I?" she objected.

He coloured a little. "Nobody need know you had gone."

"How do you mean?" she cried, much intrigued.

"If you tell Miss Marston that you are to be left quiet until you ring, she would not disturb you, would she?"

"Of course not."

"Very well. You can go out of your room by the secret door, and down the stairs that bring you out here in this cave."

Camiola gasped involuntarily. He started as if she had struck him.

"Fräulein, I ought not to have proposed this," he said in a hurried murmur; "I did not reflect. You would trust yourself to me, you would go out with me by a way that no one knows, you would go to a place of danger, and, as it would not be known even that you were out, they would be in doubt as to where to search for you should we not return at the time we expect. It is too much responsibility for me."

"There are stairs from this cave going up to the room where I sleep?" she echoed incredulously.

"Yes."

“Show me.”

He took up the lantern and carried it before her to the dark recess of the cave. There could be clearly seen the foot of a spiral stair ascending.

“Oh, do let us go up!” she cried.

“You could not get into your room, Fräulein. I fastened the secret panel upon your side before you came here.”

“Oh, I am glad you did that. But you can tell me how to undo it?”

“Yes. But do not use the stair, Fräulein. Forget what I said. I must not let you run risks.”

“But what risk is there? Surely very little! How often have you been yourself to the Gaura Draculuj?”

“Oh, many times.”

“And have you ever seen, on any occasion, any sign that anybody else had been there since your last visit?”

“Only once.”

“Well—well—tell me! What did you find?”

“It was about three months ago,” he said reluctantly. “I had been prevented from going because my aunt was ill. She had a sharp attack of bronchitis. It must have been four or five weeks since I had last visited the place. I found fresh sand.”

“Fresh sand?”

“Yes. It was more grey than the sand in which I had been searching. I had left it all trodden about with my footprints, and I had left a wooden box—the kind of box in which they pack sugar or biscuits—which I used to fill with sand. That was gone. The surface was swept quite smooth. I found both the hairpin and the spectacle frame, also most of the bits of fabric, in the new grey sand.”

Her eyes were full of wonder, but she answered lightly: “That was not very alarming, was it?”

“Only because it showed that I was not the only person who came there.”

"Yes. Oh, it *is* uncanny! You don't think that somebody here in the village, or down in Ildestadt, does it on purpose? Could it possibly be to anybody's advantage to frighten people away from these parts?"

"I cannot see that it could. Even if we could suppose it, they might surely use far more effective means to their end. On the other hand, one sees clearly that it would be for the good of the whole district to have the mystery solved."

"Of course it would. It is very puzzling. But I feel that I must see the place. Before the time that the tourists were lost it was not considered dangerous, was it?"

"No. The guides used to relate the legend of there being a dragon who lived down there. They used to roll big stones into the fissure, which echoed with a peculiar noise, supposed to be like the mutterings of a beast coiled up far down below. It was never supposed that he could get out. A few of the very old people—people living here in Maros—used to maintain that the monster still lived. Nobody else believed it."

"Well, I am going to venture. If you will not take me, I shall have to find another guide."

"Is it fair," he asked hesitatingly, "to put pressure on me like that?"

She contemplated him as he stood, holding the lantern which lit up his coarse shirt, his rolled-up sleeves, his gardening apron, and also his steady eyes and the resolute curve of his lips.

"I would trust you anywhere," she said gravely. "I absolve you from all responsibility. I will leave a note when I slip out, to be read if we do not return. When they break into my room, if such a proceeding should be necessary, they shall find a message saying where I have gone, and that it was I who insisted upon the expedition, much against your advice."

"I suppose the chances are a hundred to one against anything happening," he remarked meditatively.

"Anyway, it is an order," she said brightly. "You must take me."

He smiled a little in response to her brilliant glance. "I suppose that settles it," he said.

CHAPTER XV

THE BARON'S HINT, AND A DREAM

MEANWHILE Neville Thurlow was being borne swiftly in the car from Ildestadt down the valley to Szass Lona. His spirits were in a state of more perturbation than for years past. He was thinking of the pure pale gold of Irmgard's hair and how it nestled above the hidden tips of her delicately modelled ears.

When he reached the somewhat grim and frowning walls which contained his divinity he shivered.

The barracks were nearly three miles farther down the valley, where the Ildenfluss was spanned by an important bridge.

There was at that time no house in the village capable of accommodating the Austrian General, therefore it had been necessary to build one.

When, in the Seventeenth Century, the Transylvanian people, unable to defend themselves, annexed their country to the Dual Empire, the first step for their protection was to establish garrisons and send military governors.

The dwelling provided for the commanding officer was stiff, ugly, and inconvenient.

Mr. Thurlow was shown into a very gloomy interior, with a porcelain stove, spiky-looking chairs, and sofas with little tables and bits of carpet in front of them. There were pictures on the walls—reproductions of the Victorian mid-European school—which made one want to shut one's eyes.

When Irmgard stole into the room, it was as if some

fay, imprisoned by mortals, glided through the incongruous dwelling. Her black frock emphasised her fairness, and made her skin and hair quite dazzling to the eyes of the usually unimpressionable Englishman.

At the sight of him the colour flowed beneath the flawless skin, in a fashion which almost bereft him of his self-control. There could be no doubt that she was pleased to see him. He sat down upon one of the sofas beside her, at her invitation, given with a pretty assumption of the duties of hostess, and put constraint upon himself to talk naturally.

She was delighted at his admiration of the Ildenthal, and listened eagerly to his description of their first expedition. She herself had been to the Trollzähner Falls, so would not miss anything by not having been a member of that excursion. She was counting the minutes until she was free to join them. The children and governess had already set out, and her father was leaving on the evening of Sunday, this being Saturday. She would be quite ready to go up to Orenfels on Monday, at any time that it suited Camiola to fetch her. The arrangements were made, to their mutual satisfaction, and then coffee was brought in. Neville thought he had never passed through a more delightful experience than this, of drinking coffee with this pale, sad girl in the dreamy void of the big, hideous room. The General joined them after a while. His English was not so good as his daughter's, but he managed to understand most of what was said, and was quite courteous, though thinking apparently of other things. He was a fair man, like his daughter in type; and Neville, regarding him in the light of a possible father-in-law, thought he would do very well.

When they had finished coffee, the host, rousing from a fit of brooding, somewhat pointedly invited the young man to stroll round the grounds with him. They stepped out

of the French window and walked off, Irmgard remaining behind, as Neville could not help thinking upon a hint from her father.

After ten minutes' conversation upon the beauties of the district and his own projected tour, the General turned somewhat abruptly to young Thurlow, and said: "I am told your father was the guardian of the charming young lady Fräulein France—hein?"

"He was," replied Neville.

"I am glad you should be here," replied the Graf thoughtfully. "Hum! Ha! I wish not to speak too much—not too grave. What you call it in England, when it not so grave as a warning, hein?"

Neville hesitated. "You wish to give me something in the nature of a warning?" he asked, in some surprise. "A hint, perhaps—a caution?"

"Caution, it is what I mean. I learn something a few days since. I did not know it when Meess France she make her mind to take the Schloss for a—a period. I think it is better to warn—to caution you than to speak to herself. She is young and she is a—a maiden."

"You are very kind," said Neville, "please tell me anything you think I ought to know."

"It is only that she should be on her guard—you must use your own mind in this matter—whether you should tell her, or keep it in your own head. Do I make myself intelligible?"

"Perfectly. You are about to put me on my guard, and I am to use my discretion as to telling my cousin what you say?"

"Precisely. That it is. You know there is in Ildestadt in the Frauenstrasse a shop—a Conditorei (confectioner's)—a good shop. *Gut!* The woman who keeps this shop is a Saxon, good and sensible, not like these Roumanians. She have a little maid who come from Maros—

that is, from the cluster of châlets around the castle—on the Alp on which the castle stands. I am talking to her the other day—a worthy young woman, in my own service before her marriage. She speak to me of the young man up at the Castle, that young Esler."

"Ah, yes; the young fellow who looks so well in the native costume," replied Neville, with interest. "He is a very clever mountaineer apparently. My cousin finds him most useful."

The Graf looked extremely grave. "He does not bear a good character in Ildestadt, I hear."

"Indeed? I am sorry to hear that. My cousin thinks highly of him, I believe."

"He is nephew to Frau Esler, who is a most worthy woman. When her old husband die last year, he come to live with his aunt. They tell me he keep a woman up there."

"Keeps a woman!" echoed Neville, in truly British disgust.

"Marie Vorst, she is a good woman, not a—a—what you say—not a—"

"Scandalmonger?"

"That it is! She is not a scandalmonger, but she tell me that the young man come down to Ildestadt and buy things—*delicatessen*—that he and his aunt do certainly not want. He buy many now he have more money from Meess France. Rahula, the sister of Marie's Miona, is now at the Castle; she say she know there is a woman live up there. Very secret. I thought you ought to know this."

"Thanks very much," said Neville, after a pause. "You were quite right to tell me, and not Camiola. I gather that it would be better for her not to know, if we can keep it from her? She will only be here a few months, and if the fellow behaves himself, and does as he is told, I sup-

pose his private arrangements are hardly our affair. I confess I am surprised. I should have thought Frau Esler a very typical faithful family servant. I am surprised she should countenance vice."

"So also was Marie Vorst. She say Frau Esler the best and the more honest of women. But the young man rule her. She say anything he tell her. She say the things he buy are all for her. She say he make of her an *enfant gâtée*. They think she say what he tell her."

"How curious!" said Neville.

"I speak in chief for Meess France, but also because in her great goodness she have my boy and my girl there. I do not wish Conrad to be too much with a young man who behave like that."

"One can't quite see," observed Neville, "why he should, as you say, behave like that. Is there any reason why he should not openly be married? Why should he hide the woman?"

"That is more than I can tell you, unless he is living with some one else's wife," replied the General bluntly.

As he spoke a suspicion darted into Neville's mind, of so ridiculous a character that he laughed to himself. What if the concealed lady should be that identical Mrs. Cooper for whom he was searching?

He had duly found the *Rechtsanwalt* in Ildestadt that afternoon, and he had not been encouraging. However, as Mr. Cooper was prepared to spend money upon the quest of his erring partner, arrangements had been made to put the case into the hands of a firm of detectives at Buda Pesth who had a branch in Transylvania.

It was, of course, overwhelmingly unlikely, but it was, on the other hand, possible, that the General had just supplied him with a clue. If that were so, he thought his best way of proceeding would be to conceal all that he had heard, and make it his business to find out as much as

he could about young Esler—whence he came, and so on. It was, on the face of it, absurd to suppose that Mrs. Cooper had run away with a peasant; but Esler might easily be something better than a peasant. He had the manner of one above his station, quiet and deferential though he always was.

How earnestly Neville then wished that he had learned German in his youth! The fact that young Esler spoke no English at all was a complete bar to intercourse. When he came to reflect, it seemed also a complete bar to any theory that it was he with whom Mrs. Cooper had run from her husband. A man with no English at all could hardly have passed time enough in England to succeed in detaching a man's wife from her allegiance.

It was not a promising clue. The more he reflected upon the subject, the more unsatisfactory did it seem to be. Yet there was just the bare chance that there was something in it. He was very glad that Irmgard's father had spoken to him, and not to anybody else. He earnestly asked him to say nothing of it to any other person, and the General was only too glad to have shifted the responsibility of his knowledge to other shoulders. He impressed again upon Neville the fact that it was not serious enough to be described as a warning; it was merely a caution, and as such Mr. Thurlow assured him that he accepted it. They parted with mutual esteem, the Hungarian being much pleased with his own success in speaking the English tongue, and Neville hoping that he had made a good impression upon Irmgard's father.

The next morning was Sunday.

It was a lovely day, and the Popa from a neighbouring village came up to the Castle and celebrated Mass at ten o'clock.

The Thurlows were somewhat shocked at the idea of being present at this service, but found Camiola so much

more shocked at the idea of their being absent that they yielded gracefully. The entire population of the mountain hamlet seemed to be present; and men and women alike carried posies of flowers, a pretty custom which was new to all the English. The good Popa, who usually preached in the Roumanian tongue, since all the peasants in Maros were of that nationality, the Eslers alone excepted, to-day spoke German, in compliment to the visitors. He was much pleased at being cordially invited to lunch afterwards.

Frau Esler was touched to find her young mistress so religiously inclined. The previous Sunday there had been no service; but seeing how much it was appreciated, the Popa eagerly volunteered to come every week, and Camiola readily agreed to subscribe the necessary sum.

In the afternoon they carried tea out into the woods above the Castle—just far enough to give them all a good appetite. It was a glorious day, the sunshine poured through the green boughs, and the moss made cradles in which most people went to sleep with their novels.

Camiola lay planning and planning to herself, how best to manage her private expedition with Esler.

On second thoughts, she felt it would hardly be practicable to shirk the old Baron's invitation to lunch. Von Courland would be too disappointed, and she was most unwilling to hurt his feelings in any way. She thought the best plan would be to have her headache on the following day—Monday—and to send Betty and Neville to Szass Lona to fetch Irmgard.

Von Courland had promised to come on that day half-way up—as far as the *Kurhaus*—to show Mr. Bassett a pool where fish might sometimes be caught. He was to dine at Orenfels afterwards, and pass the night there. She might permit herself to recover from her indisposition in time for dinner in the evening.

The previous night, having carefully secured both doors of her room, she sought and found the hidden spring which Esler had described to her, and opened the secret door. In delicious terror she peered down the dark winding spiral, and sniffed the damp, mouldy scent which ascended. She held her electric torch above the void, and let it flicker upon the roughly mortared stone. How glad she was that she had chosen her room in the oldest part of the Castle! That alone made her projected expedition possible.

She ran out of doors after supper, found the gardener, and told him her new plan. He seemed a little vexed, she thought, that she should be so determined upon keeping her engagement to lunch at the Watch Tower. He raised no objections, however. He was, as usual, submissive and ready to carry out orders. It was arranged that they should meet at two o'clock the next day, in the gardening cave, and proceed at once to the Gaura Draculuj.

"It is not so very far away," he said. "Not more than a couple of miles."

The anticipation of the coming adventure broke her rest that night, and gave her bad dreams. She did not, however, dream of the "laidly worm" which she had seen so clearly in sleep the first night she had passed in Ildestadt. It so happened that the conversation at dinner and during the evening had turned largely upon that very subject. Arnold Bassett remarked that there was, in his opinion, good evidence for the belief that saurian monsters had been found in remote districts to a much later date than was commonly supposed. There was the celebrated Dragon of Wantage, not to mention the dragon slain in Malta by Dieudonné de Gozon. "They have a legend of the same kind at Kronstadt," said von Courland. "There is a chasm in the Kapellen Berg known as the Nonnenloch, or Nun's Hole, which was once the haunt of a monstrous serpent which used to pounce on travellers."

Conrad and Camiola capped this story with the legend of St. Ildemund, as given by Esler.

By the time they had done, most people were in a state of mind in which they were half prepared to believe that the Black Dragon or a descendant might actually survive.

In spite of it all, Camiola, when at last she did get to sleep, had a dream which seemed in no way connected with the subject which so preoccupied her thoughts, but was extremely vivid.

She dreamed that as she lay in bed there came a low knocking upon her door. In a panic she started awake, to find that it was only a dream. When she fell asleep again, and once more heard the knocking, she said to herself: "I am asleep; it is not real. Come in!" In response to this invitation, the secret door in the panelling opened, and Esler, in his mountaineering dress, with a coil of rope round his waist, came in, and said calmly: "This way, please."

Upon this summons she rose from her bed, not at all surprised to find that she was wearing a gown of a wonderful shade of red brocade, and followed him from the room. They went into the long gallery which ran the length of the Tudor wing, and passed through a door whose existence she had not suspected—a door in the woodwork, entirely concealed when closed. It seemed to her that they proceeded through endless passages, through suites of empty rooms, up and down stairs, along places where she had to stoop, almost to creep. Esler went along before, never speaking, and she followed as best she could. At last they came to a door at the end of a dim passage, showing above it the rafters of the roof unceiled. She felt the door to be the extreme end of everything. She had the feeling of reaching the dénouement of an exciting story, or awaiting the elucidation of a mystery. "Now," she thought, "I shall understand! I shall know every-

thing!" Her guide laid his hand upon the knob of the door, and turned to her with a smile of triumph on his lips. His eyes were sparkling, his head was held high, and he looked like a conqueror exulting in victory.

Without a word he slowly, slowly, opened the door. There before them in the centre of the room stood a couch, on which was stretched a woman asleep. The whole place was fragrant with flowers—they were white flowers. There was a radiance of countless tapers; surely it was a chapelle ardente; she saw, as her eyes ranged, in the background the kneeling figure of a priest. There was a faint sound of distant chanting. Surely the lady was dead! . . .

The thought struck her like a blow. Esler was so happy, so triumphant; and yet this lovely woman was dead! What could it mean? She began to sob in her sleep. In woe she crept nearer, till she was kneeling on the ground quite close to the couch, her hands clasped, her tears flowing.

Then the lady opened her eyes, turned her head, gave her a smile which was the counterpart of Esler's—a smile so brilliant and unearthly that the shock of it awoke her.

She was in her bed; the dawn was just beginning to creep in at her windows. So vivid had the dreaming been that still she seemed to sense the perfume of the flowers, to hear the faint solemn chanting. It seemed to her that she lay a long time, while slowly her dream self crept back to join its body, lying in the bed. There came to her a baffling sense of mystery—of something unexplained. She felt sharply and with anger that she did not know her Castle, that it was full of secrets which it kept from her.

That door in the gallery! How clearly she had seen it! Nobody had ever suggested a door there! But then, it was only yesterday that she had learned the existence of a secret door in her own room!

To her surprise she felt the tears rushing from her eyes.

"I am only an English tourist," she was thinking, "with money enough to wring, from the necessity of this old family, the right to inhabit their home. But it is theirs—theirs—not mine! I am nobody; just Miss France, of South Kensington, with hardly any ancestors and no ancestral halls. I am a mere masquerader here, and the long, silent, patient ages are laughing at me."

At this distressing moment, when everything actual seemed valueless beside the imaginings of her own brain, one comforting thought came to her and cheered her.

Von Courland had said that she had come to turn their luck. To turn the luck of this secret, grim, reserved old castle which would not confide in her. The fantasy pleased her. She smiled to herself, and began to follow out the thought. The fairy prince or princess who comes to the rescue is always resisted by the bad luck fairies, who do all they can to prevent the champion from winning through. But if pluck and persistence could do it, she, Camiola, meant to win through.

She thought of Esler's smile of radiant triumph, of the waking lady's glorious joy. . . .

"It was a lovely dream," she told herself, "and most encouraging. I have dreamed a kind of sleeping-beauty allegory. I have got to reach the farthest point, and break the spell."

So thinking, she fell asleep.

CHAPTER XVI

GAURA DRACULUJ

Two o'clock was just tolling out sadly from the plaintive old clock which hung above the outer gate, and which had not been set going for years until Camiola summoned a clockmaker from Ildestadt, and had it all taken to pieces, oiled, repaired, and made to lift up its voice once more.

The malingerer reached the lowest spiral of her secret stair, and saw the glimmer of Esler's lantern in the cave below.

There she stood—as unlike an invalid as anything you could fancy—accoutré for her adventure in a rose-coloured golfing jersey and cap, with short frieze skirt to match. Her boots would have gladdened the heart of any mountaineer. Her eyes were sparkling, and her dark hair clustered in little rings on her forehead under the cap. She looked more like a merry boy than an heiress.

Esler, with his coil of rope round his waist, was so like he had appeared in her dream that for a moment it made her jump.

“Oh dear,” she sighed, “I feel a guilty wretch! Your kind aunt has been in such a state because I was ill. She sent me up for lunch such broth as I never tasted. How she could have had it ready all in a minute is a puzzle to me! She is a wonderful cook! I was touched, too, by her minding whether I was ill or not, for I always thought she didn’t like me a bit.”

“Some people,” observed the young guide, trimming his lamp, “some people make you like them, whether you wish to or no.”

Camiola chuckled, and began to sing softly:

*“You made me love you!
I didn’t want to do it!” . . .*

He looked up in surprise. “Only a silly London song! What you said put me in mind of it,” she explained. “Well, is all ready? Shall we be off?”

“The sooner the better,” rejoined he. His manner was full of confidence and energy. He uttered no more warnings. Having made up his mind to the expedition, he had no intention of going back on his decision.

“We must go along a passage here,” he continued. “It is not very high, but you can manage all right. I will tell you when to dip your head.”

So saying, he handed her a candle in a glass shade, and moved before her to the left of the cave, whence a winding path went down, as it were, into the bowels of the earth.

“This,” he said presently, “was the secret way into the castle. In the fourteenth century the overlord of the Vale of Yndaia was besieged for three months in the castle by the Voyvod of Menes-Gola. All that time provisions were sent in nightly by way of this tunnel from Ildestadt. The enemy, who could not conceive by what means the garrison held out, set spies in all directions; and at last one of these followed a man up from the town, tracked him to this spot, and saw him enter the mountain. The night was so dark that he could hardly say how he entered—simply he disappeared. The besiegers thought there would be no difficulty by daylight in finding the way in. They failed to do so, however, search as they might, so they set a watch of six men. Each of these was slain by an arrow from an unseen marksman. I will show you presently the hole through which they took aim.

The next food-carrier, when he came up, found six of the enemy dead. After that the siege was raised. They thought the devil was on the side of Orenfels."

Camiola was much pleased with this story, and asked many questions. He told her that some thought Orenfels was a corruption of Ohrenfels, the rock with an ear, in allusion to the hidden loop-hole.

They had come by this time to the concealed outlet. He showed her the tiny cleft through which the arrows had been shot, and then, opening the door, which revolved upon a pivot, let her out into the sunshine of the mountain-side.

When he had closed the aperture behind him, it was indeed hard to tell which was the door, of all the big stones which looked so much alike.

"We will go the quickest way," he said, "and that is through part of the cavern which you know already, Fräulein—the cavern which we usually enter from the keep."

They crossed a little depression in the hill-side, clambered over the hillock beyond it, and entered a curious cave mouth, almost blocked with stones, so that she had to clamber over. Once inside, however, it was possible to stand upright; and on they went, through winding ways, until they came down into the home cavern as it was called, and were met by the musical song of the little stream rushing along its subterranean course.

They followed it to the arch where it emerged, and at that point Esler stopped, and handed his lamp to her. "If you will hold both the lights, I will carry you across," he said.

She readily complied, and, taking her in his arms, he stepped carefully into the swiftly running water, took a couple of strides, and set her upon the farther side.

Thence, a bit of a climb up a steep place in which centuries ago iron staples had been fixed to make the

ascent easier, brought them out into an open cavern, whose terrific roof seemed like the top of a huge jaw, which might descend and crush them at any moment; and thence into the full light of day once more.

"We cut off a mile by coming that way," he told her. "But if we have to bring the party, we shall not use it. I never let people know that the Gaura Draculuj can be reached by the home cavern. It is better not."

Camiola did not reply. She was so impressed by the spot in which she now found herself that she could think of nothing else.

They stood half-way up one side of a mighty ravine. There was no vegetation, nothing but bare rock, scraped and striated by the movements of some mighty glacier in bygone ages. Far, far below their feet the torrent roared, sullen in a channel only a few feet in width, but very deep, so Esler told her.

In front of them, up the ravine, an enormous black rock blocked the horizon. Already it had cut off the sun, and the whole gruesome place was in shadow. This was indeed a place for nightmares. As they two stood gazing forth into the savage gloom, the story of the Black Dragon changed suddenly from legend to fact. It *must* be true, was the girl's insistent thought.

The path upon which they stood was just wide enough to be safe. It had the look of having been artificially cut.

"Does it make you dizzy?" inquired the young man, after an earnest look at his charge.

"Not dizzy. But it is impressive," she almost whispered. "Isn't it?"

He assented. "It is like the Valley of the Shadow of Death," he remarked; adding hurriedly: "I have read that book—in a translation, of course."

"Yes, it is," she responded sympathetically; "fiends,

hobgoblins, and dragons of the pit!" She shrank back a little, as he moved onward.

He glanced quickly at her. "Take my hand," he said, in a voice of quiet encouragement. "I have been here so often that it is nothing to me; but I know it's a bit nasty at first."

She gave him her hand with eagerness, and his warm fingers closed about it. This encouraged her most surprisingly, and she went on bravely. After a silence she faltered: "I didn't expect it would be like this."

"If you come in from the other end, it isn't nearly as bad," he told her; "but I thought I would bring you this way; you appreciate——"

He broke off, a little consciously, as though he feared to have been familiar. Evidently she had no such thought. She walked along with her eyes wide and eager, her expression that of concentrated resolution.

Soon they turned a corner to their right, and it could be seen that the grim black mountain did not completely cut off the way, for a path bent round and led to a gully between two hills.

Here, with no precipice looming, she could walk safely. She detached her hand from the clinging warmth of his, and felt an immediate cessation of a curious tingling, like the flowing of an electric current, of which she had been conscious.

Neville Thurlow, speeding in the car down the easy valley road to Szass Lona with the hope of seeing Irmgard in his mind, dreamed of nothing less than that his cousin was at that very moment alone on a secret expedition in the heart of the hills, with the young man concerning whom there was such unpleasant scandal in the town.

Though the way they now went was safe, it was as gloomy and as awe-inspiring as before. In the narrow gully where they walked, the black peaks almost met over-

head. Before them arose a medley of rocks like shattered towers crushed in an earthquake. Among them Esler wound his way, until, looking back, she could not perceive the path by which they had come.

At last he paused near a tall, natural archway in the rock, and, setting down what he carried, examined carefully the light of his lantern.

As Camiola had brought an electric torch, they left her candle-stick outside on a rock.

"That will be a clue when they come to find us," said the girl mischievously.

"Don't!" he replied sharply.

"Why did you bring all that rope?" she asked, watching him.

"Because—in case of accidents," he answered. "One never knows on a mountain."

Rising, he gave the word to enter. They walked along a fine, spacious cave, growing darker and darker as they advanced. Esler went forward slowly, flashing the light of his lantern into every corner. Camiola did the same. Once he paused, and stood motionless, staring into a dim angle of the rock. "Stay where you are," he murmured under his breath. She stood while he crept forward, silent-footed, and focussed the whole radiance of his light upon the obscure corner. Nothing was there. He turned, and made her the signal to advance.

The walls closed in as they went on, until it was a narrow tunnel, and ere long they stood before a low arch, not more than three feet high. There was sand upon the ground, and Esler, stooping, examined it with minute care.

"This is just as I left it," he said. "I made that tiny cairn of stones. Nobody has passed out or in since I was here last. Now, please, wait here, while I go in and reconnoitre."

She sat obediently down upon the ground, without a word. Her heart was thumping, but she betrayed no signs of nervousness. Esler stooped, went through the arch and disappeared. She waited a minute or two, and then came his voice: "It is quite all right," he said, "you had better come in on your hands and knees; it is about eight feet before you can stand upright."

She obeyed, and, crawling rapidly through, stood on her feet within, and brushed the sand from her knees.

"Gaura Draculuj," said Esler simply.

He had lit up two rows of candles, one on each side, so that she could see well. She stood in a cavern, the shape of which was, roughly speaking, semi-circular. They had entered at about the middle of the curved side. The wall which faced them was almost vertical and very lofty. Between it and the place where they stood yawned a chasm, the farther edge of which was formed by the wall itself. It extended the whole width of the cave, and was about twelve foot across, though not quite regular in shape. The floor was not level, but sloped slightly inwards to the fissure, in circular fashion, like one-half of the shallow mouth of a funnel.

The first thing which struck her particularly was the heat. The place was like a mouldy conservatory. She contemplated the black, faintly damp walls. There were no deep recesses; no place in which a monster could lie perdu. Esler answered her unspoken thought.

"If our preposterous theory were true," he murmured, "if there were a monster, he must have been lurking outside in the large cavern and followed them in."

She shrank back with a nervous glance. "If anything could—suppose, I mean, that anything *did*—come in now, what would you do?" she whispered.

He pointed to a rope, with a looped end, which dangled from one wall. "I have been at work here on and off for

months," he said, "and the first thing I did was to plan a retreat. I have cut footholds a long way up, and then there is an ascending ledge. I think you could go up, at least some of the way, and I could follow, hand over hand, and pull you up, if you were not able to go far."

She looked at the rope a little doubtfully. "If fear drove me, perhaps I could," she laughed. "But not hand over hand!"

"Of course not. I served my time in the navy, and I know how to show a clean pair of heels. If I learnt nothing else, I learnt that. I cut the footholds, because it has of course always been my intention to share my discovery, should I make one. Will you let me try if I could get you up?"

She consented, feeling that she would have a much easier mind, should she feel herself able to make a sudden escape.

Esler buckled his lantern on his arm, seized the rope, gave a swing, and had run up the footholds in a minute. "Now sit in the rope, and use your hands to help," he cried. "Do it as rapidly as you can."

She did as she was told at once. Sitting in the loop, and grasping the rope firmly, she was hauled up, using the footholds as levers, and found herself landing upon a damp, clammy shelf of rock, which formed a kind of path, leading upwards in a slant, along the wall's face.

"I have an idea," observed Esler, "that there is a way out up here, if one could find it. I explored one day, a good way along, and I could not help thinking that at one time a path had been partially cut, leading down from above."

"It's rather dizzy," she remarked, laughing.

"You would soon grow used to it, I think. Now I will let you down, and you shall try going up by the footholds."

She was nothing loath. He let her down carefully, following himself; and then, catching the rope, she began to climb, he standing below and encouraging her. It was easy enough for the first step or two. Then came a difficult one. He assured her the next was easier. She plucked up courage, found to her joy that above the bad place the slope was in her favour; and, finally, landed triumphantly on the ledge to Esler's unconcealed satisfaction.

She drew a breath of relief; as she did so, a sound startled her. It was a low, chuckling laugh, quite distinct. She glanced down at him in panic. "Oh, what's that?"

"That's all right; I often hear it," he replied tranquilly. She stood, straining her ears for a repetition of the sound. "Come down to me," he whispered; "we will go to the edge of the chasm and look over. It is all right. I made a big cross in the sand last time I was here, and I found it just the same. The least touch must have disturbed it."

She descended, quite successfully, and they crept very cautiously to the brink of the horrible chasm. Though not perfectly regular in shape, it did not vary much in width. From end to end it measured twenty feet or more.

Lying down quite flat on his chest, Esler held his light as far outward and downward as he could. The depth was sheer, as far as they could see.

"They let a man down on a rope," he murmured, "and, as I think it tells you in the guide-book, they found some bones—sheep bones—on a ledge about eighty feet down. They dared not go lower because of the atmosphere; the lamps they lowered would not burn below about a hundred and twenty feet."

A thought came to Camiola, and she could not help laughing at her own folly as she voiced it. "Do you think lights would make it angry?"

"I have never heard that. It is rolling down rocks that seems to irritate it. At least, poor old Hoffman said so."

"Hoffman did not tell you what he saw?"

"No; he told my aunt. He was a friend of theirs, you know. He said that he grew so enraged; but I ought to explain a little. The case, you see, was this. He found himself faced with ruin. The disappearance was the talk of the whole country. The thing was so unaccountable that stories of foul play actually got about. It was said that two of the victims—spinsters of middle age from the United States—had with them a fabulous amount of ready money and jewels, and that Hoffman, in order to possess himself of these things, had arranged a wholesale murder. The tale would not hold water for a moment; but you know how these things persist. The American papers were very cruel. Well, he determined that at whatever cost he would wring the secret of this cave from it. He came up here alone—I suppose he really was half-crazed—and rolled a whole lot of stones in from the outer cave, and sent them crashing down into the depths. He told my aunt that, listening very keenly, he could hear that some fell much farther than others, and that those dropped over on the extreme right went down the deepest. Then suddenly, as a particularly large one crashed down, he heard a long-drawn hiss, like twenty snakes, fire and smoke came up from the pit, and in the midst there appeared the head and neck of an enormous serpent, black and shining, hissing like the very devil. He says it reared its head above the pit's mouth and looked at him; then, roaring and muttering, subsided into the hole, sank, and was seen no more."

As his musical voice ceased, there came again that low chuckling from the depths of the fathomless abyss.

"How perfectly awful!" cried Camiola. "But you

know the thing did him no harm. That doesn't account for the tourists, does it?"

"Ah, well, it wasn't hungry at the time, you see," he remarked, with much meaning.

She contemplated the inky depths. "I don't believe *anything* could come climbing up that," she remarked sceptically.

"Not any ordinary thing, I grant you," he replied absently.

Once more the chuckling sounded. "He seems to understand German," observed Camiola idly.

The young man laughed, showing all his short, even teeth. Their faces were quite near each other, appearing somehow different from usual in the glimmering light of the lantern and candles.

"I suppose," she said slowly, with a meaning glance at the fine collection of rocks piled up against one side of the cave, "that we had better not try to irritate him to-day?"

"We haven't time," he said, taking out his watch, "if you want to be back in your room by the time Fräulein Malovan reaches the castle. We must come again. If you can get out of the way so quickly, there ought not to be much risk."

"If he can rise out of that hole, surely he could rise to the place where we were standing?" she suggested.

"I'm a good shot," remarked Esler quietly, "and a bullet through his brain ought to quiet him."

CHAPTER XVII

THE CROSS ON THE SUMMIT

"Oh, my poor darling thing!" cried Irmgard vehemently, rushing into Camiola's room. "I am so sorry to hear that you are seedy! Hadn't we better send down a message to Ildestadt for the Herr Doktor Stahlschmidt? He isn't bad, though he is Saxon."

"Why, to tell you the truth, I am heaps better this evening," replied Camiola, sitting up in bed and shaking her mane of hair. "I am going to get up and dress and come downstairs."

"That is good news," was the delighted response. "I must say you don't look as if there was much the matter with you."

"No, of course there isn't; but you know what my headaches are. When they come on, there is simply nothing for it but solitude and bed."

"Well, Captain von Courland will be pleased. He has been looking so dejected all the way uphill that my heart has bled for him. Oh, Camiola, do you know that everybody speaks so well of him? Old Frau von Arnstein was telling me how highly they think of him in his regiment. Suppose it is really true that he is to turn the luck of the Vajda-Maros!"

Camiola's eye kindled. "Ah!" she sighed, "how interesting it all is! Come in, Marston! As I am in my nightie, you must take the Fräulein to her room, and show her everything. Oh, my dearest, I do hope you will be comfy! I couldn't give you a room quite near mine,

but you are next door to Betty, and I think you will get on together. She is so much nicer by herself than in her own family. So is Nev. I really quite like him, these last few days."

A carmine blush rose in Irmgard's fair face, and for a moment Camiola was at a loss to guess its cause. The girl turned away in a hurry, and asked Marston to show her her room; and as they departed, Camiola leaned back on her pillows with a gay laugh.

"Come back and dress me, Marston. I am going down to dinner," she cried after them. And then, curling up under the bedclothes she began to play with a new, delightful little idea.

Neville and Irmgard! Who would have thought that such a girl could care for a solemn old stick like Nev? But what a delight, what unexpected happiness to have her best friend married to an Englishman, settled in England! Would General Maldovan approve? Married daughters in England must complicate the issue for the most patriotic of us when war is on the tapis. And Conrad! What would he say? It was really very exciting.

Certainly, when she walked into the oriel drawing-room that evening, in rose-coloured satin, nobody could have thought that anything ailed Miss France.

Otho von Courland turned from his talk with Betty, and came forward with eager welcome in his eyes.

"I am so glad! I was afraid you might not be able to take part in to-morrow's expedition," he cried. "Where is it to be?"

"The Summit," replied Arnold Bassett, from his seat beside the fire. He usually felt chilly of an evening, even in this beautiful weather. "But I must own to you that Herr Neumann, when we stopped for tea at the Blaue Vögel, prophesied rain."

"If it rains, it won't matter a bit," announced Camiola. "I have a glittering plan in my head of what we shall do the first really wet day. However, nobody need ask me what it is, because I shall not tell."

They all collected round her, besieging her with questions, Conrad in particular being so urgent that he had to be smothered with sofa pillows, tickled and otherwise maltreated, before he would desist from his importunity. In the midst of the romping the dinner horn was blown, and they all went downstairs.

"Now our party is complete," cried Camiola brightly, smiling round her table. "How fortunate, as we are eight, that Miss Purdon and I are the same sex; it enables us to sit right, doesn't it?"

"You have recovered very satisfactorily from your headache, young woman," remarked Bassett dryly.

"Headaches simply have to go in this air," she replied. "Isn't it like champagne? It gets into my head."

"Shall you be equal to a four hours' climb to-morrow?"

"Why, of course! I don't mind betting that I am as good a one to go as you yourself," she cried resentfully.

"I have advised Miss Purdon not to attempt it," he went on. "She has an excellent plan. She will set out, escorted by Esler, later in the day, and climb as far as a place rejoicing in the name of Mezo Bolo, where they will have tea ready for us as we come down. Is not that a good idea?"

"Oh, but I don't think we can do without Esler all day," swiftly said Camiola.

"What nonsense, Camiola," put in Neville. "Here are myself, Bassett and von Courland, not to speak of Conrad; and Erwald will be with us. What can you want with a larger retinue?"

Camiola paused. She had been about to say that it was her party; she gave orders and made arrangements;

but just as she was going to speak, she caught Esler's eye.

He was waiting upon them as usual, but knowing that he spoke no English nobody troubled to be careful in what they said. Yet, as Camiola met his glance, it was impossible to believe that he had not understood the foregoing conversation. His eyes admonished her as plainly as speech, that she should not attempt to carry her point.

"Oh, well, as you say. I suppose he is not wanted," she said slowly. "It is a very good idea that our tea should be carried up to us. How nice to have Uncle Arnold to arrange all these things so capably! It lessens my responsibilities enormously."

If there was a dry accent in her incisive little voice as she said this, nobody seemed to notice. Bassett accepted the compliment graciously, and Neville breathed freely. He was thinking how dangerous it is at all times for a young, unmarried girl to be in control of her own actions, and backed by abundant means. She is so easily deceived and imposed upon. He had confided to Bassett something of what the Graf had told him of Esler, and they were fully agreed that Camiola had better remain in ignorance unless it should be actually necessary to inform her, but that she should be quietly kept out of the young man's way.

The following day belied the landlord's prophecy. The wind changed, and it was very fine indeed.

The party set out quite early, and made excellent time to the summit, Betty proving a much better pedestrian than could have been hoped.

As Esler was clipping the edge of the bowling green, Camiola managed to get a word with him before the start.

"Esler," said she, a little breathlessly, "did I do right? Did you mean me not to make a point of your coming with us to-day?"

He paused in his occupation, to look up at her in blank surprise.

"Pardon, Fräulein?" he asked, in a puzzled voice.

She felt herself brought up short. "I—I thought," she stammered, "that you heard what we were saying about your coming, at dinner last night."

He shook his head with a melancholy smile. "I speak no English, Fräulein."

The young mistress stood gazing upon him, with a sense of being flung back upon herself. Was this well-behaved servant the same person who had yesterday led her through secret passages, along the brink of precipices, up the sheer side of a rock?

With a little tingling shock she realised that she had been forgetting, in the intense interest of their intercourse, the social gulf which divided them. It had been he who reminded her of it.

She felt furious with him. Turning her back without a word, she marched indoors with her chin in the air. How detestable it was to be as proud as this man! Why could he not simply and gratefully accept the kindness she showed him? Why must he always be stiffening his back, just when you least expected it? Inside in private she stamped her foot.

That morning, for the first time, as they ascended the mountain, she allowed von Courland to begin to cross the barrier between acquaintance and friendship, to talk of intimate things, to claim her sympathy.

Her mind was in a curious ferment; she could not understand her own impulses. But, as a matter of fact, she was swayed by the notion of how good a revenge it would be to marry Otho, become the true, legitimate owner of this castle which stood so coldly aloof, to dismiss Esler, and to continue his researches with all the money at her

command, until they were brought to a satisfactory conclusion without his help.

She desired, quite sharply, that Esler should give her a chance to snub him as he had so many times snubbed her. She felt that she would enjoy seeing him completely discomfited.

Meanwhile, von Courland was very interesting, for he could tell them all about the finding of the past traces of the fated party on the spot where they had lunched.

The sky was blue and cloudless as they stood there to-day; the summer breeze blew warm and soft, fanning them after the strenuous ascent.

All about them the mountains lifted their mighty bastions. A few hundred yards farther, and they would see the majestic summit of the Negoi.

Here, among the short, rich grass and the scattered stones, had been found certain bits of cheese-rind, with bread-crumbs and chicken bones; also, under a little cairn, the empty wine-bottles which the light-hearted tourists had done their best to hide.

A rough stone cross stood upon the spot. Hung round it was a board, upon which was painted an inscription, already considerably weather-beaten. Translated, it ran thus:

Here, on this place, were found the latest traces of the ill-fated party which left the Kurhaus for the Kulm on the — day of June, 19—, and were never heard of afterwards.

“Requiem æternam dona eis, Domine!”

There followed the list of names:

*Sarah G. Adams, Sagramore City, Kansas.
Althea Adams, her niece.*

Mrs. Euphemia Doane, California.

Mr. Quincy P. Doane, her son.

Herr Hermann Schneider, Leipzig.

Frau Schneider.

Herr Gaspard von Courland, of Orenfels.

Martin Erwald, guide.

Ladislaus Hütti, guide.

The Englishmen reverently uncovered their heads as they gazed. Camiola translated the words for the benefit of Neville and Betty. The Thurlows had not realised that Captain von Courland's own brother had been among the lost, and Betty turned to him with her blue eyes brimming with tears.

"Oh!" she cried, "I have been laughing, and talking and teasing you all the way up, and I never knew, I never thought——"

He was touched and charmed by her sympathy. "I must own," he admitted, "that I had seen but little of my brother, who was very much older than I. His loss, which killed my mother, was not a very real grief to me. I wish, however, that I had been older at the time. I cannot help feeling that more might have been done than was done, in the way of clearing up the mystery."

"What exactly do you mean?" asked Bassett, with interest.

"I mean that the local superstition about a dragon, or some such nonsense, seems to have deprived everybody of their senses, and caused them to assume that these persons met their end in the cave known as the Gaura Draculuj, or Devil's Chasm. That cannot be true; it was shown to be false at the time of the inquiry, because no trace that they had ever entered the cave was discovered. In fact, there was proof, in the shape of untrodden sand, that they had not done so. Yet, as far as investigation

of other places went, very little seems to have been done."

"Erwald," said Camiola abruptly, "was the guide your brother?"

"Yes, gnädigste."

"I never knew your brother was one of the guides," she said, with eager interest. "Do you know whether it was his intention to take the party to the Gaura Draculuj or not?"

"I know that it was not, gnädigste. My brother had some reason, which unluckily he never confided to us, for thinking the Gaura Draculuj unsafe. He was a very careful man. He told me the night before, that the young Herr von Courland was most anxious to show the American ladies the place, but that he did not mean to take them there."

This was the longest speech that Camiola had ever heard Erwald make.

"He might have been overborne?" suggested Bassett, who had listened with close attention.

"It is likely, mein Herr; but as the young Herr Captain has just said, there was proof that they did not go."

"Who was the first person after the tragedy to visit the spot in question—I mean this Devil's Chasm, or whatever you call it?" inquired the K.C.

"The three people who first went thither were Frau Esler, Michael Esler, her husband, and myself. We went there very early upon the morning of the third day after the disappearance. Search parties had been out on the mountain-side for thirty-six hours, but nobody had been to the cave, because Herr Hoffman was positive that the party did not mean to go there. The place they meant to visit, if there was time after reaching the Kulm, was the place they call Trollsbrücke—the Troll's bridge—above the Trollzähner Falls. It was in that neighbourhood that the most careful search was made, for the rocks

are decidedly dangerous. We decided, however, that we would make certain that they had not visited the Gaura Draculuj, so we went in the early morning—we three together.

“We took lights with us, although we thought it possible we might find candles there, for the guides at that time used to carry bits of candle in their pockets to light up for visitors, as the place is absolutely pitch dark. Had the party been there, my brother and the other guide would have first gone in, lit the lights, and then called in the visitors. There was no trace of any person having passed into the cave. The sand at the entrance—you must know that you go in through a very low arch—had collected so that there was not room to go in until one had cleared some of it away. Most certainly nobody had been there.”

Camiola stood listening, with the mental picture of the place in her brain.

“Did you go in,” she asked, “and make sure that no candles had been put there?”

“Certainly we did. There were no candles, nor candlesticks. Nobody had been there.”

“How far,” asked Bassett suddenly, “is the Trollsbrücke from here?”

“About two hours, mein Herr. Mostly downhill.”

“Could we go there to-day?”

“Yes, you could go there, but not if you want to meet the Fräulein Purdon at Mezo Bolo. You would return to the castle by a quite different route.”

“What do you think? Shall that be our next excursion?” asked Bassett of the others. “Shall we follow the imaginary footsteps of the perished party, first to the Trollsbrücke, and afterwards to the Devil’s Chasm?”

“Agreed!” cried everybody. And Camiola set herself to think how she could best keep them from going to that horrible place, until her own curiosity had been satisfied.

If Esler were her ally, the thing might be managed; but now that Esler had turned disagreeable, she felt that she wanted no further dealings with him.

There came a thought into her mind. Suppose that she confided all to von Courland? Suppose she were to make a secret appointment with him to visit the cave, and see whether they could stir up the monster? How surprised Esler would be! She quite longed to see his face grow stony and submissive, in the way she had several times seen it, as she calmly announced to him what she had done.

She had a perfect right to do that, or anything else she pleased! She was mistress here.

All the way down to Mezo Bolo the thought strove within her. Should she or should she not take the Captain into her confidence? He was most conveniently by her side, and they talked a great deal. If she were to say: "I have been to the Devil's Chasm, and I believe that there really is something there—something alive, something that laughs, something that might one day show itself"—what would he think?

She looked up at his face and wondered whether he was to be trusted. It did not occur to her to reflect that she had not for a moment doubted the trustworthiness of Esler. Without a misgiving she had confided herself to his care.

They got down to the appointed rendezvous in excellent time, and found the young gardener busily occupied in setting out tea things. Marston had been coaxed to come too, and she was presiding over the spirit-kettles in a state of pleasurable flutter.

"Mr. Esler, he does understand how to build a place to keep the draught off the kettles," she remarked with exultation. "There's tea and to spare ready here, however thirsty you may all be. Now, Master Conrad, none

of your tricks," she added, with a squeal, as the boy tried to place a little lizard which he carried upon the smooth of her neck.

Camiola flew to the rescue, but Conrad was a prime favourite, and might do as he liked with the maids. The tiff was soon made up, and the lizard made haste to escape from a situation which it disliked infinitely more than Marston did.

"Camiola, you look a bit white," remarked Miss Purdon, her gaze travelling to Miss France from Betty's rose-cheek.

"I believe I am just a wee bit tired," confessed Camiola, unable to mention the fact of her fatiguing expedition of the previous day.

"Ah, you ought not to have got up and come downstairs last night," remarked Mizpah sagely.

"Oh, bosh; I feel perfectly well," protested the girl, "only I want my tea."

She found Esler close to her, with a cushion for her to sit upon and a cup of tea in his hand.

"I don't want any coddling," said she impatiently, throwing the cushion across to Betty. She added in German, "I don't like the look of that tea; it is too strong; take it away." Von Courland was eagerly offering another, which she took, hoping from the bottom of her heart that Esler was hurt.

He went silently away, returning almost immediately with the spice cakes that she particularly fancied. These also she refused, and, having done so quite rudely, began to feel better.

Esler and Erwald were having tea with Marston, their backs to the company. Camiola began to tell Mizpah of the pathetic cross and its inscription. The others took up the theme, and the disappearance was eagerly discussed in

all its aspects, until it was time to break camp and go home.

In the confusion of the departure Esler came close to Camiola, and said, in an undertone: "I have brought a spare mule. From here you can ride. It would be best for you to ride home."

"What nonsense!" said she petulantly. "I had much rather walk."

He raised his eyes, which he seldom did, and looked very wistful. "If you would, Fräulein," he began hesitatingly.

"Well, I won't!" she snapped. "Don't bother, please."

"No, Fräulein." He turned away, going slowly some distance from where she stood to the place where the mules were tied. He began, as if unwillingly, to take off the lady's pommel which he had fixed to the saddle. His head was bent, and she was sure his face was red. She felt quite pleased. She had scored this time. She had shown him that she would not be snubbed.

Before they reached home she was conscious of having been very silly. She was really tired, and the way seemed long and dull. Von Courland was talking to Betty; Neville and Irmgard seemed inseparable. Conrad was excited and tiresome, wanting his things held while he dashed after butterflies, and so on. Esler was ahead, leading the despised mule, which everybody was too proud to use. About half-way down, Conrad having run a long way from the path, she seated herself on a stone by the wayside, true to her resolve never to let him go out of sight. She felt a little injured. Surely it was Irmgard's place now to look after the boy; he was her brother. Or Esler—what was Esler for, if not to see that the tiresome child did not stray?

Her feet ached, her heart was heavy; she saw the sunset burn upon the mountain-side, through a mist which

veiled her eyes. Then came the sound of gentle hoofs, treading daintily, and she saw Esler coming back with her mule.

All her temper rose once more to the surface. When he was abreast of her, she said:

"I am not sitting here because I am tired, but because I must keep a watch upon the boy."

"If the Fräulein will go on, I will be answerable for the little Herr," said Esler, so gently and so sweet-temperedly that she felt ashamed.

He stood a minute, leaning against the mule's glossy neck, his gaze fixed upon the evolutions of Conrad, dashing to and fro among the alpenrose bushes. He had invited her to go on, but as she thought of rising, she realised how tired her feet were.

Then she heard his voice: "The Fräulein is angry with me," he said most respectfully, "and I do not know why. But I cannot bear her to be too tired, just because she will not give me the privilege of mounting her. I am her servant, and if I have done anything to make her displeased with me, I beg her pardon most humbly."

She felt some triumph, because she had shown her displeasure, and made him apologise. Yet, mixed with it was vexation that he should perceive her ill-temper.

"I don't know what you mean," she said impatiently. "What are you talking about?"

To this he made no reply at all, merely raising his eyes and letting his gaze rest upon her. It was as though he were pleading with her not to let peevishness get the upper hand, or as though he begged silently for forgiveness.

"As you have brought back Jacynth, I think perhaps I may as well mount her," she said slowly, rising to her feet. She did not look at him. With dragging feet she went round to the near side of the mule, and stooping, he held his hand for her foot. In a moment she was in the

saddle, in a vexed, prickly mood, irritated alike at her own caprice and at her own capitulation.

Esler turned from her, his hand on the bridle, and sent a long, clear whistle across the hillside for Conrad. The boy came at once, leaping among the boulders, his cheeks carmine, his eyes sparkling.

"Why couldn't you come before when I called you?" asked Camiola, quite pettishly.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know you wanted me, 'Miola. But Esler said when I heard that whistle, I was always to come that instant, whatever I might be doing."

"And what were you doing?" asked Camiola, as they began to descend the path.

Conrad began to reply at such length that his recital lasted, with a little encouragement from Esler, all the way home. The cool evening breeze fanned Miss France's hot cheeks, and dissipated her annoyance. Jacynth's pace was soothing, and she, like her rider, seemed to think that all was well when Esler's hand was on the rein.

By the time they stopped at the Castle gate, Camiola regretted her childish display of ill-temper.

"I'm sorry I was so snappy," she said abruptly to Esler, as he dismounted her.

"I am your servant," he answered very simply, but in a voice which conveyed far more than the bare words. The girl felt a curious heat, a quickening of the pulses, as she went in at the little gate, across the flagged court, to where the others stood grouped about the steps.

"We must be a little more wide-awake," said Bassett, in a low voice to Neville. "You see the young scamp has contrived to bring her home, after all."

CHAPTER XVIII

A PROJECTED ALLIANCE

CAMIOLA's fatigue had passed by the next morning. This was the day upon which they were to take their lunch in the Watch Tower, by invitation of the old Graf von Orenfels. She came down to breakfast in capital spirits, and found Otho enlivening the company with a vivid description of his aunt and his two maiden cousins. For several past generations the Vajda-Maros had married Hungarians, as there were no Roumanians of their own class for them to marry. The present mistress of the watch tower was Galician by birth, and only the old Graf could understand the Roumanian tongue. Their life was most isolated, and the ladies of the family had a habit of echoing each other, until sometimes the reiteration grew positively laughable. He gave an example:

"You come into the room, after having been out in a violent storm, and find the three dear ladies at their work as usual. My aunt begins: 'Otho, *lieber Kerl*, I think you have been out in the rain.' Then Cousin Anna, after a little pause: 'Otho, we think you must be very wet.' I assure them that I had on my overcoat and am dry. Then Cousin Linda: 'Otho, it has rained a great deal. Are you wet?'"

This recital was given in German, and some of it needed a little translating, for the benefit of the Thurlows. The conversation at table was wont to be of a curiously mixed description, for Austrians and English alike understood more of the other language than they spoke; and often Otho and Betty conversed, each in their own tongue, with

the result that they understood one another fairly well. Sometimes an odd jargon resulted from the fact that the speaker began in the language which was not his own, and supplemented it with words in his native tongue; as Camiola remarked, following the advice given to Alice by the Red Queen: "Speak in French when you can't think of the English for a thing."

It was wonderful how quickly all progressed upon the road of being mutually intelligible, after a few days spent wholly in each other's society. In the atmosphere of Transylvania, with servants who spoke no English, the growing tendency was for the foreigners to assimilate native words.

Miss Purdon was looking a little depressed that morning, and upon being rallied, she admitted her curious dis-taste for the Watch Tower, and described the vivid dreams which had visited her when she was staying at the Blaue Vögel.

Otho, listening with interest, remarked that it would be no wonder if that blood-stained old place were haunted. "My ancestors seem to have been a nice lot," he remarked. "Quite lately we came across the remains of one of their charming deeds. They were re-papering one of the bed-rooms—or rather cells; they are so small that you can hardly call them rooms—and they found a place where the plaster came off, showing that a doorway had been built up with stones. As they are very short of cup-boards, my aunt gave orders to have it opened, and inside they found the skeletons of two children. I don't know who they were. Perhaps old Johanna, my uncle's ser-vant, could tell us. They must have been there for a couple of centuries, judging by the masonry, and we con-jected that they may have something to do with the curse laid on the family. They were both boys, and their ages seem to have been about six and eight years. My

uncle had them duly interred in the family vault under the church floor, and we fondly hope that this pious deed may have lifted the curse." He smiled at Camiola, with a sudden, flashing smile, instantly withdrawn, before she had time to be embarrassed.

Conrad burst in, begging to be allowed to see the cupboard where the bones had been found.

"It was funny," said Otho. "My brother Gaspard was put to sleep in that room when he was a little chap, and my aunt says that two or three times he has told her that there were little boys in his room. They thought he alluded to a picture of the Holy Family that hung on the wall; but as he seemed reluctant to sleep there, they moved him to another room. I sleep there myself now, and I have not seen them."

"Captain von Courland," observed Betty, "I don't think I like you. Breakfast-time is not the proper occasion for ghost stories."

"I should have thought it the best," chimed in Bassett. "Time to forget them before bedtime."

"They must come to an end now, however," decided Miss Purdon. "We ought to set out in about half an hour."

In view of this great occasion, the ladies put on their prettiest frocks. Among the delicate colouring and pale tints, Irmgard's sombre garb stood out conspicuous. Nothing could have been more becoming to her white skin and golden hair than the dead black of her simple voile dress. Her throat rose from the square-cut embroidery of her bodice like a column of rare alabaster. The shade of her wide hat threw up the clustering gold beneath it.

It had been arranged between her father and Miss Purdon that, in spite of her deep mourning, Irmgard should go where the others went and share their pleasures, otherwise things would have been difficult. This, according to

the ideas of the local society, was anything but *comme il faut*. But then, everybody knows that the English are mad, and have no regard for propriety. In view of such eccentricity, much must be pardoned; and the few officers' wives having been present at the Frau Maldovan's funeral, and having marked Camiola's real grief and suitably black attire, were willing, seeing that she was so fabulously rich, to make allowances for social ignorance.

The regiment comprised the entire society within visiting distance of Ildestadt. These had all been invited to coffee that afternoon at the Watch Tower to meet the Engländerin. It would be something of an ordeal, Camiola felt. She had an uneasy foreboding, as though it were an invitation which would leave her a member of Ildestadt society in a manner she had by no means intended.

She felt a little nervous, a little uncertain of herself, as Erwald mounted her upon her beautiful Jacynth. He had put clean holland covers upon the ladies' saddles, so as not to soil their pretty frocks. She looked for Esler, who usually mounted and dismounted her, but he was nowhere about. The trifling fact helped to send her off with the least, vaguest feeling of dissatisfaction.

The gentlemen were all on foot, and during the descent they went on ahead; but at the Kurhaus they waited, and Otho placed himself beside her. He looked very handsome and upright, an oddly charming figure in his mountain costume; but she contemplated him with something of the feeling with which a butterfly may view him who approaches with a net.

He pleased her more than any man she had met so far; certainly more than any man who had expressed a desire to marry her. The fact that he was heir of Orenfels added greatly to his attraction in her eyes. She thought it vaguely possible that it might end so. Yet it all seemed

hurried and unreal. She was not ready for marriage; she did not mean to bind herself. She demanded more time to live, to realise herself, to ascertain what kind of man it was that she really wanted to have for a husband. She was anxious not to give definite encouragement, and inclined to doubt the wisdom of this visit; yet she told herself that it was ridiculous to be apprehensive on this score. Nobody could be foolish enough to think that, because you came to lunch with your landlord, you were, so to speak, making a public announcement of your willingness to accept the addresses of his nephew!

Yet conscience was whispering to her that there was a difference between this day and two days back. Yesterday, upon the way to the summit, she had permitted Otho to make a forward move. She knew it, and he knew it. Nothing definite had been said, but their relation had subtly changed. This made her uncomfortable; and as they walked on, she was realising that, having once yielded an outpost, she must expect the enemy to have advanced so much nearer the citadel.

As Bassett walked beside Miss Purdon's mule, he was observing the two in front.

"Was it judicious?" he asked suddenly, "for Camiola to start a footing of intimacy with these people? What made her do it?"

"You have misgivings? So have I," returned the lady. "But the thing was inevitable from the first moment that young von Courland saw her. Of course, we had no previous idea of his existence, when she decided to take this place. We went across the Market Square to interview the old Graf, and this young fellow suddenly marched in. Then an awkward thing happened. Camiola was very anxious to get possession at once of the castle, because I own that I was not comfortable at the inn at Ildestadt. It was on my account that she was so eager. She decided

to go up and make final arrangements early the following morning. I had been sleeping so badly that I really was not equal to the exertion, and the old Graf volunteered to go with his nephew. Of course, it ended in his letting them go alone, and the whole town has been gossiping ever since."

"It almost looks as if we were expressly sanctioning the idea of an alliance—this arriving in state," he remarked, with a twinkling eye. "But I shouldn't think Camiola means anything serious, does she?"

"One would not suppose so. He has not a farthing in the world, and he is not of her own faith."

"By her behaviour on Sunday she was leading him on to suppose that she is ready to join the orthodox Church on the smallest provocation."

Mizpah smiled. "If they think so, they little know their Camiola."

"I suppose," mused Bassett, "that she might conceivably do worse. He is of good birth, will have a title, and owns a castle in one of the most beautiful spots in Europe."

"But she might do much better."

"Well, I don't see how we are to help it," he concluded, after meditation. "I own that I like the fellow. He is a gentleman. But if she won't, there will not be much harm done. She will be leaving the place in a few weeks' time, and his heart will mend fast enough, for I don't suppose he would be hopelessly smitten if it were not for her gilded halo. It must count, even with the most disinterested of men."

All Ildestadt was indeed agog as they rode in. Everybody knew that the *Herrschaften* from the Schloss were coming to take their *Mittagsessen* with the Graf and Gräfin. Herr Neumann, having cooked the dinner they were to eat and supplied the necessary cutlery, silver and glass, knew well. Marie Vorst, who had turned out a

special batch of *Kaffeeküchen* for the afternoon's reception, was equally correctly informed. Most people were standing in their doorways, or in the street, and their remarks were approving, though fortunately not loud.

"In spite of being an *Engländerin*, I do not call her so ugly."

"*Ach nein*, she is not amiss, and will be better when she learns to forsake English oddities, and dress like a Transylvania maiden."

"He will soon teach her that. So handsome a fellow will have his own way in all things."

"Doubtless. Do you remember, we used to think it might be the little Maldovan?"

"She is a pretty girl, and will have a dot. But what is that beside the Englishwoman's thousands?"

"Which now is the heiress? The dark one, or the little love in pale blue?"

"Why, she beside whom our Otho is walking is the heiress—the dark one!"

"*Ach so!* I wish it were the little fair one; she is an ideal bride, like the princess in a fairy tale."

"He seems to have no eyes but for the *Fräulein* France, however. See how he courts her! Lucky girl! But for me she is too thin, and her face is all eyes. I like dimples and rosy checks."

So the babble went on. Though its import did not reach her ears, Camiola knew they spoke of her. She wished that Otho were not marching in this "conquering-hero" style beside her saddle. In fact, she suggested that he might go and ask Betty if she were tired. He seemed not to hear, however; he was so absorbed in pointing out to her exactly how far his ancestral lands had formerly extended along the Ildenthal.

Marie Vorst stood in the Market Square, and dropped a deep curtsey to the young Herr as he approached. Her

keen eyes searched the cortège as it filed past, and as she remarked that young Esler was not there, a smile of satisfaction curved her lips.

"Then the Herr General did find time before his departure to drop a hint," she inly reflected. "I have put a spoke in his wheel. A young upstart! Thinks himself too good for my Lise, does he? Thinks he can go about with his mouth shut, and that nobody can find out anything about the things he wants to keep dark? He will find that it is not so good a thing to make an enemy of Marie Vorst! Why, my girl could marry anybody. She will have a dot, too; and he is just the old Graf's gardener, at twelve marks a week. A nice cock to think he can crow over all the girls in Ildestadt!"

By this time they had crossed the Market Square, and approached the little postern door of the tower.

It stood open to-day, and the old Graf himself was just within. He came forward with hand outstretched in welcome, and made a long speech which, owing to his toothless condition, was difficult for foreigners to follow, but which, as far as Camiola could grasp it, seemed to contain no embarrassing allusions.

He greeted each lady elaborately as she was dismounted, and then, bidding Otho follow with the Fräulein France, he gave his shaking arm to Miss Purdon, and led her up the winding stair, their progress being so slow that the younger and more frivolous members of the party behind were in agonies of stifled laughter.

In the curious room into which the two ladies had been ushered upon their previous visit, there sat in state three antique survivals of the local aristocracy of an earlier period. These were the wife and the two daughters of the Graf von Orenfels, but they all looked exactly the same age, and seemed all to have reached precisely the same stage of decay. All three wore little caps of lace and

ribbon upon their sparse and faded hair, each had a large lace collar and a vast gold brooch like a poached egg. Miss Purdon, seeking for some point of differentiation, observed that one lady wore mittens, and hoped that this might be the mistress of the house, in which conjecture she was fortunately right.

The old Graf presented her in due form, and then, turning to Camiola, led her forward, and expressed the hope that the friendship, so auspiciously begun, might continue unbroken for many years.

This was a hope which one could echo without feeling too self-conscious; and when the whole party had been received, with three precisely similar salutations, the tenant of the castle sat down, and tried to tell her hostess how pleased she was with her beautiful summer house.

The old lady was not expansive. She remarked, drawing a little shawl more closely around her narrow shoulders — her shoulders were the only part of her that was narrow — that for her part she had found the Schloss draughty and inconvenient, and, besides, *so schrecklich entfernt*. She had been thankful to come down into the town, where one could at least see a little life.

Camiola sympathised. She owned that she herself could not face the idea of living always in so remote a spot; but for one summer it was ideal.

All three of them surveyed her as if she were a phenomenon they could not understand. Then one asked, with a faint flutter of interest, whether she found Frau Esler satisfactory. Her reply to this was prompt and warm. Frau Esler was a wonder. She kept the maids in order, cooked well, and gave no trouble.

Arnold Bassett, as in duty bound, was making gallant efforts to draw one of the daughters into conversation. He found it practically impossible, because she was listening, absorbed, to Camiola's account of Frau Esler.

“And the young man! They say he is none too steady,” went on the elder sister, craning her scraggy neck towards Camiola. “But, however, he is in the garden, so you will not have much to do with him. My father thought it would be all right.”

“Do you mean Eric Esler?” asked Camiola in astonishment.

Three old heads nodded in unison, and three voice reiterated “Ja, ja, ja,” till Conrad had to turn away to the window, with shoulders shaking.

“We find him most helpful and obliging,” said Miss France, in wonder. “Do you say he is not steady? I should have thought him a most respectable, quiet young fellow.”

“Ach ja! Our father said it would be so. He said he will not show off his airs and graces to the *Herrschafte*n. He knows which side his bread is buttered.”

This remark struck Camiola as being so conspicuously unjust, judging the young gardener by her own experience, that she merely smiled.

Bassett, having abandoned his attempt to ingratiate the ladies of the house, had gone to one of the window embrasures, and was talking with the old Graf.

“May I ask if you, sir, are the guardian of the so amiable Fräulein France?” asked the old gentleman.

The K.C., glad of this opportunity, proceeded to explain that the Fräulein was quite exempt from all tutelage, and that he had laid down his command when she was twenty-one.

“To whom, then, should one apply in any matter which concerned—which concerned negotiations of too delicate a nature to make it practicable to discuss them with a young maiden? To the excellent Fräulein Purdon, perhaps?”

Bassett explained Miss Purdon’s position, and the old

Graf was a little worried. "So also Otho told me," he said, in a vexed way. "He said she was only a *dame de compagnie*, and that it was not fitting that I should lead her upstairs. He said I should have taken the Fräulein, who is mistress of all. Now I have made a mistake, and perhaps I have done great harm. Do you think that Meess France will take offence, because I give first place to the *dame de compagnie*?"

Bassett spoke on this point with brief but firm emphasis. The Graf had done right, and exactly what Camiola would have wished.

"But I must go change the places at table," fussed the little Graf, his hair seeming to stand more erect than ever.

"Nothing of the kind, Graf. Miss Purdon is a gentlewoman, and always takes her place in Miss France's household as such. To slight her would be a sure way to offend the young lady."

"I would not do so on any account. But if such is the case, what is to be done? One cannot approach a young lady direct on so delicate a subject as her own marriage?"

"Well, Graf, you may have heard that in England we are so peculiar as to think that a young lady's marriage concerns herself more than anybody else. We actually hold that a girl who is of an age to be married, is of an age to consider the question."

The Graf looked horrified. "Do you mean that I could address the young Meess France, and say: I wish to confer with you on the subject of your marriage with my nephew?"

"Oh, no; I do not mean that. You are going rather fast, Graf, for my English ideas. Are you sure that Captain von Courland desires to marry my late ward? If you are, you must leave it to him to do the arranging. It may sound nonsense to you, but it is the simple fact, that Miss France will give her hand to the man she pre-

fers, and that she will expect that man to ask her for it himself."

It was a situation which left the Graf so astounded that he had really nothing to reply. Bassett, however, improved the occasion. He told him that in England it was considered very bad form to seem to notice anything beforehand in a situation of this kind. He warned him that if any reference were made at table or in drinking toasts to the chance of any such thing, Camiola would most probably take offence, and nip the affair in the bud. In England the relations and onlookers always affected to see nothing and know nothing. By the way in which the Graf listened to what he had to say, and the swiftness with which he subsequently went up to his wife and spoke privately to her, Bassett concluded that he had reason to thank his stars for the chance he had been given to warn the poor old gentleman. He felt sure that some allusion to the idea of a match had been contemplated. He dared not think what Camiola might have done under the circumstances.

What she was trying to do at the present moment was to avoid catching the eye either of Otho or Conrad. The conversation she had so arduously kept up with the three ladies had languished, and she was wondering what she could possibly say next, when the Gräfin remarked softly:

"You have a charming party of young people, Fräulein."

Camiola said that she thought it most kind of the Gräfin to entertain such a formidable number.

"But they are such a charming party," cooed Aunt Linda.

"All such attractive young people," concluded Aunt Anna.

The faithfulness of their nephew's imitation that morning caused Camiola to be nearer the point of losing her

manners altogether, and laughing aloud, than she had ever been in her life. The situation was saved only by the appearance of the head waiter from the Blaue Vögel, who drew back a curtain, set open a narrow door, and announced that dinner was served.

The room in which they dined was exactly the same size and shape as that in which they had been received. It was close quarters, and of course neither of the small, deeply splayed windows was open. Looking back upon that meal later on, Camiola sometimes wondered that they had all escaped asphyxiation.

They were called upon to eat hot soup, venison, cranberries, roast ducks, and other viands of an equally substantial description. It was no wonder that, having fed to repletion, the three old ladies should obviously desire a nap. The rest of the party hailed with joy the suggestion of Otho that they should go and have cigarettes and sweetmeats in the guard-house, and summon old Johanna, the family retainer, to tell them "bogey stories."

CHAPTER XIX

THE PROPHECY OF EPHROSINE

THE guard-house stood behind the keep, across a very small courtyard which was bounded by what remained of the huge inner or curtain wall of the old fortress. Within, it was a rough place, stone paved, and without hangings to mask the naked walls; but Otho had done his best to make it habitable. There were weapons hung up, some fine stags' heads, a stuffed badger, and other signs of his hunting prowess. Rugs were on the floor, and there were comfortable chairs.

"There is no room at all inside the tower," he said, shrugging his shoulders ruefully. "This is the only place I can call my own, and I sleep in the cell just above."

His frank way of speaking caused Camiola to look upon him with a new access of friendliness. He really was a very nice fellow.

As he was the only member of the family present, they were all as unconstrained as though at Orenfels. Betty discovered a beautiful mother cat with two kittens in a cupboard, and took the entire family upon her knees to play with. Camiola looked at Otho's regimental photos, and discovered that he was the champion jumper of his regiment. The men smoked, and Conrad was made happy with an oily rag and a gun to clean.

Soon there was a tap at the door, and a small, bent woman crept into the room, curtseyed to the company, and looked to Otho for orders. Her sunken but brilliant eyes, half lowered, flitted from one to the other of those

present until they rested upon Camiola with the same wistful intentness which had drawn the girl's gaze upon her first arrival in Ildestadt. Miss France felt a sudden beating of the heart, accompanied by a curious sensation as though invisible threads or cords surrounded her. She took a deep breath, and had almost raised her hand to her forehead to brush away the floating films. She was glad when the odd silence caused by the old woman's entry was broken by Otho's gay voice.

"Come along, Mütterchen," he cried. "Sit down on this stool. We want you to make the company's flesh creep with one of your awful stories."

"About the skeletons they found in Otho's room," put in Conrad, in breathless excitement.

"Yes, and that will mean my sitting beside you tonight, and holding your hand until you are asleep," remarked Camiola cruelly.

"Rot, 'Miola!" cried the slandered boy, crimson.

"Never mind, Conrad will have to get over it," said Otho calmly. He had not much sympathy with nerves, as far as healthy boys are concerned.

"If I tell you of the Prophecy of Ephrosine, the skeletons come into that story," announced the old woman, laying her brown, wrinkled hands upon her knees. She glanced again at Camiola. "It is all written in the Town Records," she remarked softly. "There is no escape from that." She moistened her lips, and went on: "I will speak very slowly, that the ladies from England may understand."

"I'll interpret, if you don't," Bassett promised the Thurlows.

"In the year 1611," began Johanna, "the old lord of Orenfels, which, then, was called Yndaia, had two sons. In those days, you understand, the family lived at Orenfels all the summer, but in winter they usually came here

to the tower. They used both houses as their own. The names of the young men were Otho and Dmitri, Otho being the elder.

“Halfway down the hill from Orenfels, on the very spot—the cursed spot—where the Kurhaus was afterwards built—you would see in those days the house of Cornea, the gamekeeper, a Roumanian. He had a daughter, named Ephrosine. She was not so much beautiful as wonderful. Her mother had been a Tzigane (gipsy), and was handsome, but Ephrosine was more. She had a glance that sent men mad. There was one man upon whom her heart was set, and that was Otho, the young Herr. She laughed at all the others.

“Otho was young and hasty. All his life he had always had what he had set his heart upon. He was determined to marry Ephrosine, and marry her he did. How they managed it is not known.

“Ephrosine still lived on in her father’s cottage, for the old lord would have killed his son had he dared to confess that he was married to a peasant.

“Two beautiful boys were born to her, and it was not known that they were hers, for her married brother and his wife lived in the hunting lodge, and every one supposed the boys belonged to them. For several years Ephrosine kept quiet. Her husband loved her, she saw him often, if secretly, and she was not unhappy. But when it was a question of a marriage for Otho, she would not be silent any longer. He warned her that if she confessed, they would be both ruined; but she was not to be deterred. She waited until her husband departed, on a visit to the lady whom he was to court; then she took her two children, went up to the castle, and told the old lord to his face that she was his son’s wife, and these were his heirs.

“Now at the time Dmitri, the younger son, was pres-

ent. He was full of cunning. He restrained his father's anger, and by his advice the old lord said very little, but took it so quietly that Ephrosine was in triumph, and wished she had had the courage to confess long ago.

"The old lord said that if these children were his heirs, they must be put into his charge, to be brought up as a nobleman's sons should be trained. She was ready and willing to do this, and to go back to her own home alone, as he desired her to do, until he should have ascertained beyond doubt that her story of the marriage was true.

"So she left her babes up at the castle and went home, and the old lord and Dmitri plotted their scheme of revenge.

"In those days, as you know, ladies and gentlemen, any person who was accused of being a witch was in great danger. Two days after Ephrosine took her boys to the castle she was arrested for witchcraft, on the complaint of one Niklaus Urzsu, a ploughman from Maros, who had been one of her disappointed suitors.

"I think I told you that she was of a wild kind of beauty. When she was excited, it is said that she was like one possessed by a devil. You may think how she raged and fought when she was dragged to prison. Her gipsy blood was against her in the eyes of the people. They were obliged to do things quickly, if they wished all to be over before the young Herr Otho returned. It was easily managed. Several witnesses swore that the poor thing had bewitched them, and the townsfolk went mad with fear, and were ready and eager to have her burned. It was never mentioned that she claimed to be the wife of Otho and the mother of his sons.

"The family came down to Ildestadt from the Schloss for the trial. She was condemned and she was actually burned alive, out in the Market Square yonder, just before the place where the Ikon of St. Ildemund stands.

It is said that the old lord took the torch, and lit the pile that burned her, and that he stood there and watched her torments. As to her two children, they were never seen or heard of after that. . . . Until——”

“Until,” burst in Conrad, “the Frau Gräfin made them unwall the old cupboard, as you told us this morning, Otho!”

Otho was looking rather white. “I never heard that story before,” he said to the old woman. “It is certainly bad enough for anything. I did not know that there was any story that would throw light on the dead children.”

“What did her husband say when he came back?” cried Betty, leaning forward, pale with eagerness.

“He killed his brother,” replied the old woman, shaking her head. “I do not mean that he murdered him; he was too brave a gentleman for that. He challenged him to fight, and gave him a chance for his life; but Dmitri was cowed by the knowledge that he was fighting in a bad cause. The elder brother slew the younger, out here in this little courtyard, one moonlight night. He was obliged to flee the country, and he died unmarried, being slain in the Thirty Years’ War. His sister’s son inherited, and since that there has never been an heir in the direct line, as it is said that Ephrosine prophesied, while she stood in the flames in the Market Square.”

“If that is all really true, Johanna, I think the breed of the Vajda-Maros ought to be exterminated,” cried Otho, flinging the stump of his cigar in among the flowering geraniums with which he had filled his open hearth.

“They have paid for it long and bitterly, dearie,” said the old woman gently. “Please God, better times are coming.”

“It is really true?” inquired Bassett briefly.

Johanna turned her keen eyes upon him. “The trial and death of Ephrosine are all to be found in the city rec-

ords," said she. "You will not find there any proof that she was what she claimed to be—the wife of Otho Vajda-Maros; but that she was the mother of his children seems to be established by two things—first by the terrible vengeance which Otho took upon his brother on his return, and, second, by the children's bones found only a few years back."

Miss Purdon spoke suddenly. She had risen when the story finished, and was standing with her back to them all, gazing out of the window. She now spoke without turning round: "It is true that the old lord lit the torch and watched her burn," said she. "I saw all that in a vision. I also saw them carry out the dead body of Dmitri. They carried it towards the river."

"Did they?" cried the old woman, quivering with eagerness. She got up from the wooden stool upon which she had reluctantly seated herself at her young lord's command, and approached Miss Purdon with hands outstretched. "That is what nobody has ever known," she quavered, "what they did with the body."

Camiola put her arm round Conrad's shoulders. "Do you think," she whispered, leaning towards Otho, "that he ought to hear all this?"

"Come on up into my room, old man, and see the cupboard," said Otho at once. "The cupboard where they found the poor little bones. It is full of my coats now."

Everybody else clamoured to see also, and Otho laughingly said they had better come up two and two, as his room was monastic in its proportions.

Camiola and Conrad went up first. The little corkscrew stair was very narrow, and the room into which it led was about twelve feet square. There was a camp bed, and the bare necessaries of a man's toilet. The cupboard had been lined with wood, and looked most commonplace and everyday. The window had an outlook above the

walls to the Castle of Orenfels—a fact to which Otho drew the girl's attention before they went down again.

Miss Purdon and old Johanna were meanwhile conferring eagerly, the servant being inclined to look upon the Irish lady as a white witch. Camiola said no word of the dream concerning the Black Dragon which had visited her. She had kept that consistently to herself.

Johanna said that the whole of Ephrosine's prophecy, uttered in her agony, was recorded in the town chronicles. It explicitly stated that the curse was to endure for ten generations, that the Orenfels estate should pass into the hands of the foreigner and the stranger, that the family blood should mix with the blood of aliens, and that the Vajda-Maros who should do away the curse, and whose children should inherit, would be a dragon-slayer, brave and fair.

Miss Purdon could not but see how well this description might be said to fit Otho. The old woman pointed out that it was not likely that he would actually slay a dragon, but that the prophecy no doubt referred to the very curious fact that Otho's mother, who knew nothing of the prediction, had given her little son, as his second name, that of the patron saint of the family—Ildemund, the dragon-slayer.

"Yes, he is Otho Ildemund, Otho the dragon-slayer," said the old woman in a tone of quiet triumph and satisfaction. "If we do not say too much, if we are quiet and let things take their course, who shall say what may happen?"

These last words were murmured softly and confidentially after Camiola, who had heard the first part of what was said, had turned away.

There was little time to reflect upon the marvels they had just heard, for a messenger now arrived to announce that the coffee-drinking company was assembling.

They repaired to the reception-room accordingly, and found that the door between this and the eating-room had been set wide, that coffee was served in the latter, and that by this means the extra persons present could be accommodated with a little crowding.

The von Arnsteins, the von Glucksbergs, and the von Imberts were duly presented, the men in uniform; and a few unmarried subalterns completed the circle.

There was much civility and many compliments. Camiola was highly congratulated upon her German, and received great attention; but the universal opinion of the company was that Betty, plump, fair and dimpled, was the pretty one, and that it was a pity she was not also the heiress. Camiola's soulful type was not approved.

As the Orenfels party wound their way once more uphill to their eyrie, as Neville called it, that evening, the subject occupying them all was that of Mizpah's visions. Bassett was seriously of opinion that they ought to be written down and sent to the S.P.R.

Camiola volunteered to make a written statement, as she had heard the dreams from the dreamer herself long before she knew that they were reproductions of something which had actually happened.

Conrad was less impressed than his sister had feared. The happy fact that Otho quietly inhabited the chamber where the bones had been discovered had somehow discounted the importance of the whole thing in his boyish imagination.

Camiola, as she rode up the slope to her castle, was thinking to herself that she would ask Esler to slip up to the boy after he was in bed, to be quite sure that he was comfortably asleep.

Esler was not to be seen, however, when they arrived. The boy who was groom under Erwald came and took the mules. There was barely time to change before the dinner

horn sounded; and it was with a perceptible shock that Camiola, coming downstairs on Bassett's arm, found that a plump handmaiden stood beside Forbes at the buffet instead of the usual picturesque figure.

Afterwards, as the butler handed coffee in the drawing-room, she asked if Esler was ill.

"I believe he is not very well, madam," replied the old butler impassively.

"Find out if he needs anything or ought to have a doctor," commanded the young mistress, and Forbes replied, "Yes, madam," in exactly the same voice.

The next day was extremely hot, and the party decided that they were going to loaf and play tennis. Everybody was lazy, and the hours drifted by on wings of sunshine and peace.

Otho's absence made things a little dull, perhaps. He was always the life of the party, Neville not being conspicuous for high spirits. Camiola was certainly moody and abstracted, and Miss Purdon and Bassett looked meaningfully at each other as this symptom developed. The lady felt glad, in this puzzling situation, that the ex-guardian should be on the spot. She felt slightly guilty when she thought of the wrath of Mr. and Mrs. Thurlow should the golden prize really fall to the young officer. Yet, after all, what could they do? Nothing at all. Camiola was her own mistress.

Irmgard remarked to Miss Purdon that afternoon:

"Isn't 'Miola queer? I mean, somehow, unlike herself? Brooding or something. Do you think it can be that she misses Captain von Courland? I thought yesterday that the old people were very sugary, and so on. I don't think I want 'Miola to be married yet."

"My dear," said Miss Purdon, "I don't suppose either you or I can stop it, but if you think you have any influ-

ence, I beg of you to use it. This curious fancy for an old castle will pass over. A young girl who finds herself suddenly in command of great wealth is sure to be a bit freakish at first. But very soon her present passion for ultima Thule will be a thing of the past, and I should be very sorry if she were to be entangled in any disagreeable consequences."

Irmgard laughed. "The Captain is a nice fellow," she remarked meditatively, "but his family! Think of having Cousin Anna and Cousin Linda for one's nearest kin!" She broke off with a little sigh. "I don't know if I dare say anything," she said, "for since I came up here 'Miola seems somehow different. She has shut up. I can't describe it, but I used to feel as if she were a maze, but I knew the way in. I was in the centre, but now I am wandering about the outer circles."

"I know what you mean," replied Mizpah. "I too have noticed it. I think, if I were you, I would make an effort to find your way back again. Mental isolation is not good for Camiola."

All that day Irmgard watched, but Camiola was never to be entrapped. After tea Neville persuaded the girl to go for a stroll with him up the Alp and into the birch-wood. In the glamour of that stroll Irmgard lost all memory of Camiola's affairs.

Nothing was said. It was what was left unsaid that was so strangely sweet.

CHAPTER XX

THE MIDNIGHT ERRAND

THAT night was very hot—much hotter than they had so far found it at Orenfels. Not a breath of air stirred, and the waxing moon passed slowly across a cloudless heaven.

Camiola was in a difficult mood. She could not understand herself.

Surely it could not be true that she was actually pining for the society of young von Courland?

That sounded preposterous, she whose night's rest had never yet been broken on account of any son of Adam.

Yet if it were not that, what could it be which possessed her with so strange a restlessness?

Of course it might be the heat. Her room, facing upon the south terrace, had been very hot all day, since such luxuries as sun-blinds were unknown in her ancient dwelling-place.

Her thoughts turned naturally to Otho, for what had happened the previous day at the Watch Tower had convinced her that the Vajda-Maros hoped and foresaw a match. She must have been dull indeed had she not divined it. The circumstance obliged her to think. It was necessary to make up her mind, because if she did not mean to marry an impecunious noble in a regiment of Honvèd Hussars, then their pleasant intimacy must cease at once. It seemed to her a great pity. In England these things are left to chance, and often enough this turns out badly. But she thought it immensely preferable to the

foreign idea that there can be no easy intercourse between young people unless a marriage is contemplated.

Her bed was unbearably hot. Sighing over the exceptional heat, she wondered if that was what had affected young Esler. He had not appeared at all that day, but Forbes had told her that he was all right, and that he begged the Fräulein would not disquiet herself on his account.

She felt much inclined to arise, put on some clothes, and slip, by way of the secret stair, down into the garden. She had just sprung up, with intention to carry out this design, when she remembered that the garden cave was always kept locked.

With a sigh of disappointment, she flung down the stocking she had caught up, took a thin silk kimono, slipped it on, and strolled to the window. Right across the oriel stood one of the large, heavy sofas which are to be found all over the country in any room in any old-fashioned house. She had been lying upon it that afternoon, reading. Now she fancied that it would be cooler here, with all the casements flung wide, than in her bed.

She fetched a coverlet and her pillow and lay down.

Her thoughts, however, continued so active that she was still wide awake when, about half an hour later, she heard a sound outside in the garden, a step, crunching the gravel.

In a moment she had started erect, and she was in time to see Esler come round the corner of the building and emerge into the moonlight, which now flooded the terrace. He was bareheaded, and wore only a shirt and knee breeches, with the thick stockings and square-toed shoes of the country. He came along so swiftly that at first she thought he must be pursued. Running lightly and fast, with even pace, he reached the flight of steps leading down to the bowling green, cleared them at a bound, and fled on down the hill, disappearing from view

very soon owing to the steepness of the slope down which he was rushing. She could perceive only that he was not following the curved path, but leaping through flower-beds and over boulders, going, as directly as he could, straight down to the end of the garden.

This seemed to her very surprising. Esler, who had been unwell—too unwell to do any work—for two days, was running out of the house as though his life depended upon it. Where was he going and what was he about? She wondered whether he had had a touch of the sun and was slightly deranged. It was so impossible to guess any reason for his headlong flight.

What Neville had said of his running, on the day that Conrad was lost, came back to her. "He runs like an English public-school man." And, as a matter of fact, he ran like a conscript from the Austrian Navy!

She flung herself back upon her pillows in complete bewilderment, but with an intention to watch and see if he would return.

She settled herself cosily, her face turned to the window, feeling extraordinarily wide awake. But in a very few minutes Nature asserted her authority, the lids drooped over those wondering eyes, and Camiola slept the sleep of healthy girlhood.

It was with a start that she awoke, to the consciousness of early dawn. The light outside was hardly brighter than the moon had made it, but of a different quality. The air was full of the twittering of countless birds, and she had been awakened by the fact that a pretty little chaffinch had alighted upon her window-sill, and was uttering his long-drawn whistle like a call to rise.

As she stretched out her arms, he fluttered away, but not very far, only upon the banksia rose, where he balanced himself and sang so jubilantly that she felt con-

vinced his wife must have hatched a second brood that very morning.

Sitting up, she rubbed her sleepy eyes and admired the faint opal of the misty sky. It was like looking at a fire through a mother-o'-pearl shell—infinitely beautiful.

A sofa is apt to cramp one after sleeping several hours, so she arose and took a turn about the room. She was vexed with herself for falling so soundly asleep, and so missing Esler's return from his run, and was wishing she had kept awake, when a sound struck on her ear so unexpected that she stood motionless a moment, then glided, stooping, to the open casement.

She had heard somebody speaking in the dim garden below.

Kneeling upon the floor of her room, sheltered by a muslin curtain, she could see without being seen. It was quite light enough for her to distinguish the figures of two men coming slowly up the garden path as though they had made great haste and were fatigued.

The sound of their carefully subdued voices came to her, but no words. Esler she could easily distinguish, for his shirt was white or light in colour, and he wore no hat. The other was in black, with a soft felt hat dragged rather forward over his face. As they approached nearer she saw that Esler carried a bag. Soon after she perceived that the stranger had a long dark beard. It was nobody she knew—of that she felt sure. They were now ascending the steps from the bowling-green. They had fallen silent as they neared the sleeping house; but as they gained the terrace the dark man paused to take off his hat and mop his forehead, and Esler spoke.

His voice was low, but as Camiola was almost immediately above his head his words reached her in the stillness of the night.

"I could not bring you the short way," he said, as if

apologising. "The Herrschaften occupy the room at the top of the stair."

"Ja, ja," said the other, nodding in comprehension.

"This way," softly added Esler, and they both moved, stepping upon the grass edging to the corner of the wall, and disappeared.

Camiola crept to her bed and lay down in a flutter of curiosity.

She felt convinced that Esler had been down all the way to Ildestadt and had fetched somebody thence! She began to consider times. By the mule road it took about an hour and a half to go down to Ildestadt, and two and a quarter for a man who was a good walker to return. She guessed that it must have been midnight, or possibly later, when she saw Esler run. It was now ten minutes past three. He must have been down by that other shorter road, by which the townsfolk had brought supplies to the castle in the days of the famous siege.

Who could the mysterious stranger be? He, the invalid, who had been unable to perform his duties for two days past, he had dashed away in the night and brought back a bearded ruffian with a bag—somebody as like a burglar as any description could paint.

What ought she to do? Ought she to go and awaken Uncle Arnold and tell him that she had seen a strange man brought into the house?

As she considered the affair in her mind, she knew that she did not seriously imagine that Esler would bring a bad character into the castle. Moreover, if burglary were contemplated, then they would not choose a moonlight night—a night in which it had never been dark for a single hour, since dawn and moonset had almost corresponded. Also, they would have begun their operations earlier in the night. The burglar idea was nonsense, she

felt convinced. But who and what was the mysterious stranger?

She lay considering this lazily, since she had decided that, come what might, she was not going to awaken the household. She had reached only one conclusion—namely, that she would ask Esler himself straight out who it was—when sleep once more overtook her, and she next became conscious when Marston stood pouring tea beside her bed with so calm and contented an expression that she felt sure no armed ruffian had made his wild entry into the peaceful life of the staff.

It seemed that Bassett and Neville were both keen about going fishing that day. The pool which von Courland had showed them was so well shaded that it could be fished even in fine weather; and they thought it would be delightful to go thither if any kind persons would bring them their lunch.

This the ladies promised to do. They thought it almost certain that Otho would walk up from Ildestadt that day to inquire how they were after their day at the Watch Tower. Conrad would have to be posted on the main road to tell him where they might be found, and prevent his going all the way up to the castle for nothing. Conrad objected. He wanted to fish. Erwald was required to bring the ladies and the lunch, so Bassett said he supposed they had better tell Esler to come along and do sentry.

Forbes, when asked to take a message, looked doubtful, and said he did not think that Esler could be spared. Upon Bassett expressing surprise, Camiola explained that the young man was really not her own but the old Graf's servant, and had quite as much work as he could manage in the garden. She added that she would speak to Frau Esler about it.

She thought, as the woman came to her in the servants' hall, where she usually gave her orders, that it might well

be she and not her nephew who had been ill. She had black marks under her eyes, and all the aspect of one who has not slept for some nights. The fanciful idea that her nephew might have been doing the cooking for her during the past two days floated through Camiola's mind. Perhaps that was a cook whom he had smuggled up hill last night!

"How is your nephew, Frau Esler?" she asked. The woman looked surprised, and answered that he was well.

"I thought Forbes said that he had been unwell. He did not wait upon us last night or the night before."

Frau Esler answered very respectfully, with lowered eyes. "I did not know the waiting at table was part of his duties. I thought he only undertook it until Mr. Forbes should have trained one of the maids."

"Oh, yes," hastily cried Camiola. "I do not mean to complain at all. I was most grateful to him, and I know it is not part of his duties. I only asked because I do not want to seem unkind, and because the gentlemen wanted to know if he could go out with them this morning."

Frau Esler looked doubtful. "I think not," said she. "He has had to do things for me during the past two days which have kept him busy. He has much that needs doing in the garden."

"I will tell them so," said Camiola quietly. "You yourself do not look well, Frau Esler. I hope you are not finding the work too much for you." In spite of her feeling that Frau Esler had snubbed her, she spoke very kindly.

"If the Fräulein is satisfied, I am also," was the cold and formal answer.

The young mistress again felt wounded, thrown back upon herself, in the way in which the Eslers always made her feel it. She was quite unused to such an experience. Even the grumpy, taciturn Erwald had thawed percepti-

by under her gentle kindness. Only the Eslers remained aloof, wrapped in their proud reserve.

Well, it could not be helped. She did all she could, and if they would not meet her they must remain apart.

“I am well satisfied with all you do,” she replied, swallowing down her mortification, “but I want you to promise me that you will ask for more help if you require it. I mention this because the Gräfin von Orenfels, when we went to lunch with her, presented me to the gentlefolk of the neighbourhood, and I should like to give a party here.”

“Certainly, gnädigste. On what day?”

“I have not decided. I wished to see you about it first. If I give a party here, it is certain that nobody can return home until the following day. I shall want many rooms prepared.”

Frau Esler flushed and looked alarmed. “But what rooms, Fräulein? There are only the one occupied by the Herr Captain when he comes and the two small ones near your own.”

“What about the ones we do not use?” asked Camiola calmly. “The ones you reach by means of a door in the gallery?”

In the silence which followed, Frau Esler being unable to help showing some symptoms of surprise, the girl could hear her own heart beat. Her random shaft had gone home.

“The Herr Graf keeps those closed,” said the Frau, at last. “They are only garrets, and in them are stored such things as are not let with the castle. The rooms would be quite unsuitable for the accommodation of visitors.”

“Of course; but we might go up there ourselves for one night and put our guests downstairs.”

“Even if you did use those rooms, Fräulein—and I assure you they are only garrets—how would you get bed

linen, and so on, for so many guests?" She spoke swiftly, and with some vexation.

"That is quite easily managed. I borrowed an idea from the Watch Tower. Herr Neumann will send up bed linen—beds also if necessary—he will also lend me cutlery and plate and table linen. It will be quite easy. If you please, I should like to see the rooms before I decide against using them."

Camiola spoke easily, but inwardly she was filled with a queer excitement. The door which she had dreamed—which Esler had shown her in sleep—really existed, then! The long passage through which she had groped, the unceiled roof—these were real! There was a range of garrets in her domain which she had not yet explored.

Frau Esler took a moment to assimilate the plans produced so glibly by her young mistress. At last she spoke: "The Fräulein will forgive me if I refuse, quite decidedly, to show her the garrets without leave from the Herr Graf."

"Oh, certainly; but I am sure he will grant it," was the ready response. "I do not mind paying more rent, if he likes. The Herr Captain is coming up to-day, and I will ask him. He can give leave quite well."

Frau Esler said no more, but she flashed a look almost of hatred at Camiola. With a murmured assent, she curtseyed and went out of the room, leaving the girl in a state of the greatest indecision.

Why was Frau Esler so annoyed? Could it be that these apparently trusty servants were doing in secret something which they did not wish should come to the ears of their employers? It really looked like it. From the first it had been the same—from the moment when Frau Esler knew the castle was let right on until now. Every forward step taken by the new mistress met with rebuff, with opposition.

She turned away, sore and uncomfortable, yet triumphant too, and remembered suddenly that Bassett and Nev were waiting to know if she could secure young Esler.

She ran to tell them that this could not be managed. "I don't quite know what is the matter," said she, "but something has upset Frau Esler. I think she is ill and won't say so, and that the young man is helping her with her work instead of doing his own. But you need not bother about Captain von Courland. Nobody ever comes up the mountain except ourselves. Write a note to him and lay it in the middle of the path under a stone. He simply cannot help finding it."

Every one agreed that this was a good idea, and the note was accordingly written, the two gentlemen immediately afterwards departing to their fishing.

Camiola gave orders to Forbes to prepare lunch, and to Erwald to carry it, and went away to write letters in her own room before preparing to go out herself.

Seated at her lacquer table in the oriel, her eyes fixed upon the lovely prospect without, the perfume of the garden in her nostrils, the blue haze of settled summer heat over all the fair land beneath her, she let her pen lie idle while her thoughts wandered.

Something disquieted her. She was restless and suspicious. What were the Eslers about? In her mind was crystallising the resolution to tell von Courland all about it. Their attitude from the very first needed explanation. She saw that now.

As her mind worried itself over the question, a gentle tap came at her door. "Come in," said she.

It opened slowly, and Esler stood, hesitating, upon the threshold.

Camiola flung down her pen. "Come in and close the door," said she swiftly; "I want to speak to you."

Like one entering a holy place which his presence dese-

crates, he obeyed her. She had never before seen him thus shy. He stared at the floor, twisting a key in his hands.

His nervousness made her nervous without knowing why. "Did you come to say something to me?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered, very low. He remained in the middle of the floor about ten paces from her.

"Well, come and tell me," she encouraged him. "I can't shout to you right across the room."

He advanced, but not quite near. The strong light of day poured upon his face, and it looked drawn and weary, but it wore also another expression—something softer than she had yet seen. It was hard to say wherein lay the difference, but she felt that he had altered subtly since she last saw him—that he had become a more emotional creature. She was conscious of disliking the change.

She made a charming picture, seated there in her white gown, the sun upon her dark hair, gilding it with light. The mellow tints of the old room, the fine lines of the casement window, the glory of the summer day without—all combined to make such an effect as one rarely sees even in a long lifetime—a harmony of youth and happiness.

"I wanted to say I am sorry," he began; "my aunt told you I had not time to do something that you wished. I will find time. Will you tell me what it is that you want?"

"It was nothing of any importance at all," she replied carelessly. I have made other arrangements, and you need not trouble about it. I am sorry your aunt seemed to think that I was making unjustifiable demands upon your time."

"No, no," he burst in quickly. "She never meant that."

"I can imagine how tired you must be, not having been to bed all night," she went on calmly.

His head came up with a jerk, and his eyes met hers, steady and blue.

"Not having been to bed last night?"

"I saw you run down the garden," she replied quietly, keeping her gaze fixed on him, "and I also saw you return—with a friend. I very nearly roused the house, to say I had seen a burglar."

He met her eyes quite steadily. "I went to fetch the doctor, Fräulein," he said simply.

She gave a little start. The explanation was so simple, yet to her unexpected.

"I am very, very sorry that I disturbed your rest," he went on. "It was the Herr Doktor Stahlschmidt who was with me."

"Your aunt?" broke in Camiola.

He shook his head. "It is not my aunt. It is a poor woman to whom she has been very kind. She has been ill during the past three days. This morning, thanks to the Herr Doktor, she is better."

Camiola leaned back, with a look of relief. "Well!" said she, "but why could not your aunt tell me that? I am not a monster; I have some human sympathy. Isn't there something I could do to help? You know I want to."

"That is why," he answered low, "that is why we will not trouble the Fräulein. She is so heavenly good. There is no need to trouble you, indeed. Since you pay us such good wages, we are able to do all. But I—" He hesitated, and grew red.

"Well, what is it?" she asked gently.

"I would ask something; but it is difficult."

"Tell me, Esler."

"My aunt does not wish it known," he murmured low. "The Herr Graf does not know, and the Herr Captain does not know, that she has this—pensioner. It is not certain that it would be permitted. I wish to implore you, Fräulein, of your great kindness, not to say to any one what I have now told you." He struggled with him-

self, and added shamefacedly: "It is most unwillingly that I bring myself to ask."

Camiola flushed warmly. "Esler," she cried impulsively, "do you really think you could make such a request to me in vain?"

He almost turned his back upon her. "I know I could not," he said, almost inaudibly, "but that makes it all the harder to have to ask."

There was a silence. She felt as if a dear brother of hers were in trouble, and as if it would be natural to take his hand, press it, and beg him to cheer up. She wanted to throw her arm across his bent shoulders, and assure him of her sympathy.

All that she could trust herself to say was: "You don't know how glad I am that you told me. I knew Frau Esler was in trouble, and I did not like to show impertinent curiosity. I promise you I will not say a word, but you will tell me if you want anything, won't you? I want to help. Can't you see, I always want to help!"

He turned upon her suddenly, with so changed a look that she almost winced. His hands were clenched, straight down at his sides, his face was flushed, there was water standing in his blue eyes.

"And it is I that ought to help you!" he burst out, "and who can do nothing. I'm a servant, and I mustn't even say 'Thank you' as I want to say it."

Her bewildered face warned him. His look changed, his head drooped. "I beg your pardon, gnädigste," he said, moving away as soon as he had spoken.

She was too amazed to reply in any way; but, as he reached the door, he turned, with a sort of dogged patience.

"My aunt told me to say that, if the Herr Captain gives permission, I will show you through the garrets this afternoon. There are only two rooms that are locked."

He waited for no response, but went immediately out.

Camiola sat as he had left her, and wondered whether the world had turned upside down.

Yet nothing had happened, except that a foreign rustic had made her an unusual kind of apology.

CHAPTER XXI

BETTY'S ACCIDENT

OTHO reached the shrine of St. Ildemund in record time from the city gate. He was growing so used to go up and down the mountain that it seemed nothing at all. He was hot, but hardly out of breath, as he paused to wipe the dew from his handsome forehead.

As he did so, he became aware that in the centre of the path, just where the road to Orenfels forked away from that which led to the left to the Trollzähner Falls, something white lay under a stone.

He picked it up and read, to his great delight, the news that the party was picnicking near the fishing-pool, and would be found if he came along.

Turning gladly along the more level path he made good pace, pondering as he went over various matters. He had bad news to give that morning, and upon the question of how Camiola received it would depend the immediate urging or the postponement of his suit.

Striding along, after a while he began to whistle. The notes rang out clear and bird-like above the murmur of the stream, near whose bank he was now moving.

A cry came to his ears. Abruptly he ceased to whistle and listened. .

“Help, please!” said some unseen person, and after a minute added these surprising words: “*Wenn du Deutsch bist, bitte zu Hilf!*”

He could not help the smile that curved his lip under his moustache at this appeal. Who could it be? Some

one whose German was of the most elementary description. He looked all around, but could see nobody. He must not let the speaker—who was undoubtedly feminine—become conscious of her colloquial solecism, so he cried out:

“Wo bist du?” And was almost immediately answered:

“Oh, is it you, Captain von Courland? I am almost in the water, down under the bank.”

He flung down his hat and coat, which he was carrying, and lowered himself from the path, looking this way and that. Before long he saw the glint of a golden head and a bit of the pale-green linen gown which Betty wore.

“I’m coming,” said he, hastening at his best speed.

He was horrified when he had reached her, to see how pale she looked.

“Oh, please be quick. See if you can lift the stone that is on my foot,” she implored him.

“Why, how on earth did you contrive to do this?” he cried, as he approached the great rock which held her pinned. “Lie quite still for a minute. I don’t know that I can lift it alone. Yes—yes, it’s coming! There”—as the mass toppled over sideways, leaving her clear. “My word, don’t move. You have hurt yourself badly, I’m afraid.”

The crushed grass was wet and slippery with blood, and her delicate frock was stained. She was in a most uncomfortable position, supporting herself on one elbow; and as she experienced the sudden relief of having the weight lifted, she turned white and her head sank sideways.

He was growing quite English in his habit of carrying a folding cup in his pocket. He ran to the riverside, filled it, and hastening back raised the girl very tenderly, holding the water to her pale and quivering lips.

She drank, and let her head rest against his coat, seeming quite content to lie still for some minutes with eyes

closed. He sat there looking down upon her, and watching with gratification the colour steal back into her face. Then her lids were raised, and two grateful blue eyes looked into his, first with relief, then with confusion, a sudden blush, a turning away.

It was wonderful. In that moment the heart upon which Betty's head lay pillowed gave a leap for which its owner was unprepared. He thought it must be audible to her, but she was too occupied in realising the fact that Captain von Courland had her in his arms, and that his vivid, handsome face was but a few inches from her own.

"Thanks so much. I am quite all right now," said she demurely.

"Don't you think," he began hesitatingly, "just a little longer——"

"Oh," sighed Betty irrelevantly, "the German language is simply awful! I am glad it was you, and nobody else, that heard me say 'Du' when I ought to have said 'Sie.' "

"Perhaps," said Otho, "that was not a mistake, but only a prophecy."

Betty smiled. They all knew he was Camiola's suitor, and thus he might one day be Betty's cousin-in-law. She accepted the remark amiably, and said she hoped so.

Then she begged him to go and find the others, tell them what had befallen her, and send Neville to the rescue. He, however, thought it would be well to ascertain first how much damage was done, and whether she was badly hurt.

"I don't believe I am," she replied. "What a good thing I took Camiola's advice, and wore thick boots. I think they have saved me a good deal!"

Indeed it seemed so, since the upper leather of her boot had been torn completely down, and Otho was able to slip it off without the formality of unlacing. The foot within was grazed so as to present a mass of crushed tis-

sue, from which the stocking was with difficulty detached.

“How did it happen?” he asked.

“I just strayed along, gathering willow gentian; it is such a glorious blue. I saw that big clump, just by the water, and I felt I must have it, so I swung myself down off the path, stepped on this boulder, and set it rolling. I fell as it gave way under me, and then I don’t know what happened. Either I or the stone seemed to tumble head over heels. And down I came, and down it came, too!”

“I’m going to carry you to the stream, to hold your feet in the running water,” he said. “Then we can see what mischief there is.”

He did so with strength and care. She sat on the grassy verge, watching the water slip away below; and the cold stanchéd the bleeding in great measure.

“I don’t think it’s broken. I can move all my toes,” said Betty gravely, suiting the action to the word.

“Fortunately you had soft grass and earth under you, so the stone did not wholly crush you. When I first saw it, I really thought your foot was pulp,” he cried, with much relief; adding, after a prolonged contemplation: “What a pretty little thing a girl’s foot is!”

“I don’t think you ought to make personal remarks,” replied Betty, with a very prunes-prism expression.

“Taking an unfair advantage of my position, isn’t it?” he smiled.

“You would be better employed in going and calling my brother.”

“I will; but first let me move you, in case you turn faint again, and fall into the water.”

“I shall not turn faint now. I am ever so much better. The water is doing my foot no end of good. Do please go and call Nev.”

He was obliged to go, though his movements at first were very slow and unwilling.

His appearance, and the news he brought, caused consternation in the camp. Conrad rushed away to summon Nev from his fishing; and Otho and Nev hurried off, armed with a white silk scarf to enwrap the injured foot.

They made a chair with their interlaced arms, in which they carried Betty back to the picnic; and Miss Purdon said that she must see a doctor. Erwald had better go back to Orenfels for a mule, and after lunch she must be placed thereon and taken to Ildestadt.

“By the good God’s arrangement, the Herr Doktor Stahlschmidt is to-day up at Maros,” remarked Erwald.

Camiola, who had been hesitating between the desire to say this and the fear of betraying confidence, was much relieved.

“When he comes,” went on the muleteer, “he arrives and departs by the short route, crossing the Trollsbrücke. If I go and wait there, I shall catch him as he comes down.”

“How do you know that he has not already gone?” asked Camiola, somewhat anxiously.

“He was to stay until after dinner,” replied Erwald.

“Will he have anything with him?” asked Mizpah, “because I have all appliances up at the castle.”

“Oh!” murmured Camiola, with the memory of the black bag in her mind, “depend upon it, when he goes up the mountain, he takes all he is likely to want with him. He doesn’t expect folks up there to keep a medicine chest.”

“Very well, then; Erwald had better go to the Trollsbrücke, stop him, and bring him here,” decided Mizpah.

“We might,” suggested Otho, “after lunch carry Miss Thurlow some of the way towards the bridge, so that the doctor may have the less far to come.”

“But I am so heavy,” demurred Betty.

"But we can carry you quite easily," he persisted eagerly.

Bassett remarked that he badly wanted to see the Trollsbrücke himself, but could not bring himself to leave his fishing that day. Conrad also, who had been lent a rod, was fixed upon the fishing with the fell determination of a small boy with a new hobby.

Neville, who likewise desired to continue his sport, which included the tuition of Irmgard, threw cold water upon Otho's suggestion. The farther they carried Betty up that way, the farther they would have to bring her back.

"Couldn't I go home by the Trollsbrücke?" asked Betty, "instead of coming back again."

"Oh, no," cried Camiola, "it is frightfully steep," and checked herself abruptly, realising that she was not supposed to know anything about it.

Erwald was the only person who took note of her slip. She saw him glancing at her with interest.

"Oh!" sighed Betty, "I am so dreadfully sorry for spoiling this beautiful day."

"It is especially sad for me," replied Otho, "because it is my last."

They all cried out. What did he mean?

"I have come to say 'Good-bye,'" he remarked, in melancholy tones. "I have to go back to my regiment for several days, perhaps for a week or longer. At the end of that time, I shall, I hope—nay, I am almost sure—be granted more leave. But I must be off to Hermannstadt to-morrow."

Camiola heard the news with an inward gasp of relief. This gave breathing-time. This would enable her to test her own heart, and see how much she missed him, how ardently she desired his return.

To Betty, on the contrary, it seemed as if the light went out of the sky at his words.

"Oh!" sighed she, before reflecting, "how much we shall all miss you!"

Miss Purdon saw the glance which accompanied the words, and intercepted von Courland's wistful, answering eyes. She dashed into the breach, covering Betty's slip. Indeed, they would all miss the Captain sadly.

He owned, looking down and plucking nervously at the moss between his knees as he sat on the ground, that he felt absurdly down in the mouth. Usually he dreaded his summer visit to Ildestadt. It was being buried alive. But this year—— There was an eloquent pause, and he dashed on. He wanted to make a petition; he had no right to be so selfish, but he was going to venture. Would Miss France put off the visit to Gaura Draculuj until he came back, so that he might be of the party?

The hearty response to this request showed how popular he had made himself. All declared their willingness to wait. Camiola was particularly pleased to have so good a pretext for deferring the expedition. She meant to make another secret visit before they were all introduced to the fatal spot.

Since Esler's appeal to her that morning she had changed her intention of speaking to Otho about the house-keeper and her nephew.

Miss Purdon, glancing at her face, was in doubt what to deduce from it. Either Camiola had decided against the young man and was glad to be rid of him for a time, or she was in dread of falling seriously in love and welcomed a respite. Which? In view of the girl's distract manner during the past few days, Mizpah was not as confident as she would have wished to be that the former theory represented the truth.

"There is one thing I want to ask you about, Captain von Courland," said Camiola presently. "I intend to give a party at Orenfels, and, of course, everybody who

comes must be put up for the night. Herr Neumann will lend me all the extra things I want, but we are short of rooms. Frau Esler tells me there are some garret rooms in a different wing which are kept locked, and that she could not let me use them without the Graf's permission. Could you give me leave, do you think? I would most gladly pay extra rent for the privilege."

"Why, of course, you may use anything you like; I am sure my uncle would say so!" cried Otho. "I don't believe he knows himself what rooms there are. Frau Esler knows more than any other living soul about the castle, except, perhaps, old Johanna, who is, as you may not know, Frau Esler's aunt. I shall tell my uncle that you want to use all the rooms, and I know he will be delighted. What fun it will be!"

"Oh," said Conrad, "I know what we could do when the visitors come—we men could use those funny rooms in the keep, couldn't we?"

"Some of us men," replied Bassett, with perfect gravity, "would rather keep to our own beds."

"Effeminate Englishman, isn't he, Con?" laughed Camiola, with her arm round the boy. "But I really don't think the keep would be comfy, you know. Anyhow, we will see what the other rooms are like first."

"You won't have the party till I come back, will you?" pleaded Otho dolefully.

"Of course not! I must have time to send out invitations, and to make arrangements with Herr Neumann, and to settle how to entertain my guests. I suppose I can get a band from Herrmannstadt. The bandsmen will have to sleep in the keep, Conrad. And we can dance in the gallery if we can muster enough people to make it worth while."

This fascinating suggestion set them all off discussing various ideas, and Irmgard and Otho began counting up

all possible dancers. He could bring a couple of officers from his own regiment, and there were two von Imbert girls and two young von Glücksbergs quite nice. Herr von Arnstein liked dancing, and it was said they had a niece. Then there were the subalterns; and the von Arnsteins might know of some one else. Camiola produced a pencil and wrote down names, and nobody listened to Miss Purdon's opinion, which was that no sane person of either sex would come so many miles on mule-back merely for the sake of an evening's entertainment.

"I see now why the American millionaire sheered off," she remarked. "This place is far too isolated to be of any real use to anybody."

Erwald now approached, to say that he was ready to go and meet the Herr Doktor, and what should he tell him?

Camiola arose, and said she was going with him. Otho looked from her to Betty and back again. Miss Purdon was there to look after the invalid; his duty was clear. He must go with Camiola. But Betty had seen the hesitation.

It was an uncomfortable walk. Otho had thought it his bounden duty to take his chance if he could get it. Camiola was firmly resolved that he should not get it. She kept things upon the plane of frank friendliness which poor Otho found so baffling. He tried not once, but repeatedly, to bring back the talk to the direction it had taken once and once only: on the day they walked to the summit. Camiola frustrated his efforts as fast as he made them. During all that he said, and all that he left unsaid, his mind held the picture of the raising of Betty's lids, and the look which had dwelt in her large blue eyes. If only Camiola and Betty could change places!

In desperation, after his fruitless attempts to be personal, he began to talk of Miss Thurlow, and Camiola ac-

cepted the change of topic with eagerness. She told him much of her cousin, and said how glad she was to see her so happy and enjoying her holiday. At home she was not in altogether congenial surroundings; her elder sister was inclined to tyrannise over her. She remarked, with an air of unconcern, that she hoped Betty would marry. She would have two hundred thousand kronen at least, and she—Camiola—meant to give her a house and furniture when she married by way of a wedding present.

This information left Otho breathless. For quite a long time he walked on, never saying a word. To him a fortune of ten thousand pounds was wealth. It made anything possible.

“I should think she might have more in the end,” remarked Camiola. “My uncle has a very good, old-established business, and Neville, I hear, has enlarged it. They are prosperous people.”

She remarked the young man’s abstraction with whimsical pleasure. He had discovered Betty wounded, he had come to her rescue, he had revived her when fainting, and bound up her foot. Suppose these two should fall in love! What a good way out of the difficulty for her!

Then a pang shot across her mind. Could she bear to see Betty mistress of Orenfels?

Perhaps they would sell the castle to her? They could never intend to live in it; and Betty would certainly desire her husband to spent part of his time in England.

Thus, each rapt into musing, they walked on, unconscious that they no longer conversed, until they had ascended a hillside so steep that it was like the ascent of a stone staircase, only with steps two feet high, and found themselves at the Trollsbrücke.

CHAPTER XXII

THE MYSTERIOUS CRY

THE arched stone bridge spanned the ravine, not so very far below the awful spot at which she and Esler had emerged from the home cave.

It was known to be eight centuries old, and some considered it older. It was a relic of the times when all stores went up that way to the castle. The other road, past St. Ildemund's, had probably been taken into use on account of the great danger and difficulty of this one.

As far up as they had come, the way was safe though steep. It was above that it grew almost precipitous, as it led up to the cave mouth on the side of the ravine. For many years now it had been wholly neglected, and was in bad condition.

Under the bridge the water rushed in a cataract, gathering impetus for its plunge below over the falls.

Not far from the bridge was the crumbling remains of a stone shelter, erected for the use of travellers in bad weather. The sun beat down to-day so fiercely on the hill-side that Camiola, assured by Erwald that the Herr Doktor had not yet come by, went into the hut and sat down in its shade. Otho did the same, and they began talking desultorily about the wild scenery, until they heard the sound of voices. By leaning forward, Camiola could descry that the doctor was laboriously descending, and that Esler was with him.

“How surprised they will be to find us here!” she laughed. “Don’t move; they won’t see us until they actually pass by.”

In a minute more they did pass by, and came to an abrupt halt.

Camiola rose, and stepped out into the sunshine with her hand outstretched. "The Herr Doktor Stahlschmidt, I think?" she said courteously. As she spoke she caught sight of Esler's face, and had difficulty in repressing an exclamation. He grew so white that she thought he would faint. He looked like a man who has received a blow. His eyes were fixed upon Otho.

For a moment she felt her thoughts distracted from what she had come to say, but almost at once she knew that she must take no notice of what she saw. She continued to speak to the doctor, indicating Erwald as her authority for knowing that he was up the mountain, and telling him of the accident to a member of their party. The doctor professed himself quite ready to go and attend to the young lady, and took his bag from Esler, who carried it.

Camiola turned to Otho, and held out her hand. "As I am going up home this way, I will take leave of you here," she said kindly. "You tell me that you cannot spend the evening with us, owing to your early departure to-morrow, so I will say Auf Wiedersehen, and hope to see you back in as few days as duty permits."

Otho took leave in his best manner, but with joy in his heart. He was going to have another glance at Betty. He was thanking his kind stars that he had not committed himself with Camiola.

The doctor, Erwald, and he turned away down the precipitous path, leaving her standing in the sun, motionless, and Esler beside her like a statue. She said nothing at all until the three men had disappeared behind the inequalities of the mountain-side. Then, without looking up:

"Will you take me home, Esler?"

"Assuredly, gnädigste."

She gave a long sigh, and stole a look at him. "Have

you found the sun too hot?" she asked. "You don't look well."

"I am quite well, thank you!" he replied mechanically.

"I decided," she remarked, "to come home this way, in order that you and I might arrange our plans. Fate has played into my hands in a most unexpected manner. The Herr Captain has to go away for a week—perhaps more. He asked me to promise not to have an expedition to the Gaura Draculuj until his return, which, of course, I did with delight. Now we can settle a time to go there together first."

He made no reply of any kind. She glanced up to see what was the matter.

"Come and sit down in the hut," she remarked abruptly. "This sun is perfectly grilling."

In response to her imperious order, he did approach the hut, but would not enter it. He stood in the shade, staring at the ground.

Just as she was thinking for the hundredth time how eccentric he was, he spoke huskily.

"It is a great pity that the Herr Captain must go away. You will miss him."

"We shall all miss him," she replied, with simple directness. "He is a nice fellow."

There was another silence, and when Esler spoke again his tone was perceptibly more cheerful.

"This is where folks say that the party was lost," he remarked.

"I know." At once her tone was eager. This was the keen guide, the trusty mountaineer, the person whom she liked, and in whose society she felt comfortable.

Quite naturally they began to discuss things. He took her down to the cliff's precipitous edge, and pointed out a place, rather below the bridge, where was a pool of unknown depth. How nine sane persons could have drowned

themselves in this pool in broad daylight, nobody had volunteered to explain.

"After all, we do know something," she remarked dreamily, staring down into the swirling water. "You have evidence we cannot dispute, in the things found in the sand. The mystery is, how they came there!"

"I mean to find out," he asserted.

"Yes. I feel convinced that you will, but I do want to help. It is curious how this thing has got hold of me! I want, more than ever I remember wanting anything before, to find out the truth of this affair. But, of course," she added, with a sudden touch of self-consciousness and confusion, "I have no right to be a bother to you. You are not my servant, as your aunt reminded me to-day."

He broke in. "But you know otherwise. You know! What did I tell you the other day, when I had displeased you?"

Something in his tone puzzled her. It sounded as though he were an equal, reproving her for caprice. She laughed.

"But isn't it a little bit ridiculous?" she said. "Either you are my servant, and I have a right to command your time, or you are not my servant, and I have no right."

His face flamed red. "That point is easily settled. You pay me wages."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Does it include attendance when on dangerous expeditions?"

"Above all things it includes that."

"Very well. Now we know where we are. Let us arrange for our next secret expedition. You know I have been thinking it over, and I can't help seeing——"

He waited. Then, as she did not go on, he said: "Yes?"

"That it would be best—would give us more time—if we went in the night."

"I did not like to point that out, but, of course, you are right."

"I cannot very well disappear from view for a whole day," she laughed, "and even for half a day the headache device is very thin. I am so desperately well and strong; I don't think they believed me last time. If we started as soon as I am supposed to be in bed, we should have plenty of time, and nobody would suspect anything."

He agreed. "The moon will soon be full," he said, "and if we go, we ought to take advantage of that. Just above there"—he pointed to the height—"it makes all the difference; the cliff path is dangerous in the pitch dark."

"I think," she reflected, "that I can keep them all quiet for a few days. Mr. Bassett is quite content to fish, and the heat makes the others prefer tennis to climbing. I mention this, because if I am out all night, I shall not be good for a hard day afterwards."

"Certainly. I will do all I can so that you may not be over-tired again, as you were the other day. I will take food and wine. As for precautions, I have fixed another rope; and as well as my revolver, I have a more powerful weapon—an elephant gun—given me by a traveller on board ship. I have put that on a ledge of rock, so that I know where to find it."

"Splendid! Shall we go to-morrow night?"

He hesitated. "Might it be a little later? It would be better if I could get some sleep before we venture, and I have not been to bed for two nights. If you are set upon to-morrow, I will do my best, and I dare say it would be all right; but, in a case like this, I don't want to take risks, and sleeplessness spoils one's aim, and makes the hand shake."

She applauded his caution. "Of course, you must have sleep. The third night from now shall be the time. Oh, it makes one shudder, even in this sunshine, but I promise

not to lose my nerve. I shall know the path quite well, as we are going back by way of the home cave now." She rose to her feet. "By the way, I hope your invalid is going on well?"

A smile broke over his face, and his voice sounded full of pride and exultation as he replied: "I thank you, Fräulein, very well indeed," adding, half shyly: "May I say how much obliged I am to you for not letting any one know that you knew the doctor was up the mountain."

"Oh," cried she, with a sudden intonation of comprehension, "was *that* what you were so afraid of?"

"So afraid of?"

"Just now, when you came suddenly upon me, waiting in the hut there, you turned so white I thought you were going to faint. Surely you did not think I would betray you when I had promised?"

"Most certainly not," he replied warmly. "I—I did not know I looked white. It is very hot weather, is it not?"

"Yes, perfectly lovely," she answered slowly, gazing down the valley before turning to breast the hill above them. "I feel so happy," she remarked, hardly conscious that she spoke aloud. "Everything seems going so well, just as I could wish; and I am going to have such an adventure!"

"It's a glorious world!" cried Esler impetuously.

Bassett was annoyed when Erwald and the doctor came back without Camiola, and he was told that she had gone home by the Trollsbrücke with Esler. On the way home—a mule having been fetched, and the duly bandaged Betty placed thereon—he told Neville that he thought they would have to give their hostess a hint.

"I don't like to do it," replied Neville. "Camiola's charm is her frank unconsciousness. To her Esler is just

a peasant, and I must say I have found his manners uniformly excellent. As the General laid stress upon it, I am keeping Conrad out of his way, but I am more than half inclined myself to look upon the whole thing as gossip. If there were any truth in it, I think von Courland would have heard of it, but evidently he knows nothing."

"No, that's true. He told me that his uncle put complete confidence in young Esler, and that he is a first-rate servant."

"If he ever forgot himself or was rude, Camiola would soon take order with him; but I know she likes him," went on Neville.

"At the Watch Tower the other day the women were hinting something about him to her. I overheard it," Bassett confided. "They spoke of his being stuck up, as far as I could judge, and she laughed in their faces. I see no justification for interfering. No doubt he has a sort of devotion to Camiola, and does all he can for her; but then, she is a rich mistress who pays well, and may pay better, besides being young and attractive. He would be a surly young ruffian if he were not anxious to do his best."

"Then you agree with me that it would be better not to repeat gossip to Camiola?" demanded Neville; and accepted Bassett's assent with relief.

"We should have some trouble to replace the chap," commented the K.C. "He knows all the ropes, and is on good terms with Erwald. Let us continue to pursue a watching and waiting policy."

Next day Camiola found Frau Esler not perhaps willing, but submissive in regard to showing the locked rooms.

They went together to the gallery, accompanied by Irmgard; and Camiola felt more than ever as though moving through the pages of a story book, when the

hidden door proved to be exactly where she had dreamed it. They passed through it into a long stone corridor, very narrow, and lit by loopholes only, at the end of which a corkscrew stair led up one floor. Here was another passage, the counterpart of the one below, only lit by dormers, and extending much farther. The windows, and the way in which the passage passed across the whole extent of the castle wing, suggested that it had been added at a later date over the older floor, for the purpose of accommodating the retinues of servants who accompanied the seventeenth century nobility upon its journeys, and were become too refined for the quarters in the Keep. There were, however, only three doors in the long extent of the passage, besides one which was at the farthest extremity, facing them as they walked along. This, Camiola felt sure, was the door she had seen in her dream; above it the naked rafters were clearly distinguishable.

Frau Esler unlocked the first of the three doors, and they entered a long dormitory, with a range of wooden partitions or cubicles. There was no furniture, except for one or two old chests and a cupboard. There was no ceiling, and light was admitted through unglazed dormers, deeply set under projections of the massive roof.

As the Frau had said, they were but garrets, and unfit for the accommodation of guests. All three dormitories were exactly alike, and each would hold six beds.

Camiola decided, however, that they could quite well sleep up there for one night—the ladies in one dormitory, the men in another, leaving their own quarters below for their guests. The roof was perfectly weather proof, and Frau Esler assured her that no rain came in through the window-holes, even in a driving storm. The summer weather would prevent their feeling the need of glass. A couple of men with pails of distemper could make all clean and fresh in a very few days.

"What an odd place!" sighed Irmgard. "I think I should be afraid to sleep up here, if it were not that the men will be next door."

"I don't see what there is to be afraid of," replied Camiola, glancing round. "It is all quite clean, and there are no dark corners."

"N-no," replied Irmgard, half laughing, "but——"

"But the Fräulein Maldovan has not that love for old, strange places which possesses the Fräulein France," said Frau Esler dryly.

Both girls laughed. "Well, Frau Esler, are you going to show us the whole extent of the place?" asked Camiola, coming out into the passage and pointing to the door at the far end.

"That room is closed, Fräulein. In it are stored such family property as cannot be taken to the Watch Tower. The Fräulein will perhaps be graciously pleased to allow the old family to reserve just one garret for their private use?"

The tone was superficially respectful, but the irony which underlay the plea was perceptible enough.

Camiola could not help colouring. "I am sorry to have shown impertinent curiosity," she remarked, a trifle warmly. Frau Esler did not contradict her. She stood awaiting further orders with her mouth firmly closed, and her hands folded over her large apron.

"I think everybody who lets a house furnished keeps one room to store away things in, 'Miola,'" said Irmgard deprecatingly, not quite understanding the frown upon her friend's face.

"Of course. One would think that I was trying to break open the door!" cried Camiola impatiently. "At least, there is no reason why *these* rooms should not be used, if we want them. There is nothing in any of *them*."

"I had them cleared yesterday," remarked Frau Esler, with a slight suggestion of patient martyrdom.

"Oh, why did you take the trouble? The things could have been piled up; we shall not want all these stables," replied the girl, with an angry laugh, turning away to walk downstairs.

At the foot of the winding staircase she remembered that she had laid down a small pocket-book, in which she had taken notes, upon one of the old chests. Frau Esler had gone down first to open the door at the stair-foot. Irmgard was next, and Camiola last.

"Tell Frau Esler to wait a few minutes. I have left my book and pencil up there," said she. And, turning, swiftly retraced her steps.

"Let me go!" cried Irmgard, but in the narrow space it was not easy to pass, and she allowed her friend to have her own way. With a curious sort of satisfaction, Miss France found herself once more in the passage and alone.

It was very still and very warm under the old roof. The sunlight entered in shafts like glittering sword-blades athwart the narrow alley, and as she whispered to herself:

"Powdered with gold its gloom's soft dun."

She could hear the cooing of wood-doves somewhere close by. Very likely they nested in the rafters, since they could fly in and out at pleasure.

She opened the door of the first dormitory timidly, as though some effluence from the past might meet her. All was still and dimly quiet. On this side the sun did not enter, and the light was not very strong.

She searched this room in vain, then the next, and finally found what she sought in the farthest of the three. Emerging from this last, and softly closing the door behind

her, she stood for a moment in a sort of wonder of contemplation before the door of which she had dreamed so vividly.

The dove had ceased to coo. No sound came to her from below; and it was at that moment that she heard in the warm, throbbing silence something which caused her heart to give a leap of fright, though it was not a sound to inspire terror. On the contrary, it was the one note which will reach the heart of any woman in her youth, awaking echoes from an age-long past—the thin, appealing wail of a new-born infant.

It travelled towards her through the door with wonderful clearness, considering the thickness of Orenfels oak.

For a moment she doubted her ears. Then the sound was repeated. She could just catch the low murmur of some one who soothed and hushed the plaintive cry.

So that was the doctor's errand! A swift indignation that she had been kept in ignorance of the wonderful thing which had transpired in her castle caught her by the throat. There was a baby—a live baby—in there among the stored furniture! And she had never seen a new-born baby in her life! How detestable Frau Esler was!

Her knees were shaking under her as she made her way down to the lower landing.

Frau Esler awaited her with apprehension in her eyes.

"Of course," remarked Camiola, "I found the thing in the very last place in which I looked."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE BLACK DRAGON

ALL Europe lay bathed in the light of the splendid August moon, which moved across the heaven with trail of silver like a queen in a state procession.

The radiance revealed the mighty limbs of the huge mountains, stretched out in dazzling masses, interspersed with nightmare gulfs of terrible shadow, of darkness unspeakable.

As Camiola and Esler emerged from the home cave, and stood upon the narrow road which led upward to the Gaura Draculuj, or downward to the Trollsbrücke, the effect of the majestic night suddenly displayed before them was almost too much for the girl.

Sitting down upon a stone on the inner edge of the path, she cupped her chin in her two palms, resting her elbows upon her knees, while her wide eyes drank in the glory of the night, and her bosom heaved with feelings she could not utter.

Esler stood at her side, with arms folded. He was never talkative, but this evening he said less than ever. After an interval of motionless waiting, he seated himself near her, took a peach from his pocket, and began to peel it very carefully. Having halved it, and removed the stone, he laid it upon her knee, dished up on a paper mat with a lace border. "I expect you are thirsty," he remarked.

She smiled her thanks. "How perfectly delicious! I had no idea that I could eat anything out here in this

moonlight, but a peach seems to be the one thing possible under the circumstances. It was clever of you to think of it."

He smiled indulgently, as one smiles at an engaging child, carefully removing the paper when she had done, screwing it into a ball, and tossing it to the oblivion of the waters in the ravine, in dutiful observance of her iron rule against the leaving of paper or debris of any sort after meals in the open air.

This done, she arose reluctantly. There seemed no reason for haste. The long hours of the night stretched before them, and something in the magic of the scene affected her like an imperious command to linger.

"How strange it seems!" she said, in a hushed voice, "that one so seldom sees this beauty. How different life would be, if we spent long hours upon mountain heights in moonlight! As a rule, we are asleep while this pageant is marching across the sky—asleep in a house, in a street, with no view but the windows opposite. . . . And when it is all over, and the light of common day has come, we jump up and go to shops and buy things! Life is a puzzle!"

"Oh, but men are wise," he answered gravely. "We know we cannot bear much of this magnificence. We are not built strong enough to resist the pressure of eternity, and so we make buttresses for ourselves out of such things as meal-times and shopping and cooking, and other ceaseless, small activities. A sight so stupendous as these mountains, or the endless expanse of ocean, with the same moon lying over it, making paths of gold, leading whither? These things would send you mad with longing, if you often let yourself be influenced by them."

She had ceased to feel it strange that he should talk thus. She merely cried out to him: "Why? Can you answer that question, the question of the ages? Why

does great beauty seem terrible to us? Why does it make us feel as though our hearts would break?"

"Don't you know?" he answered. "I thought you would have known. It is because it reminds us of things we have tried to forget for thousands of years."

She whispered her next question. "What things?"

"The earthly Paradise," he answered. "There they had all these things; and they could bear them, because they were not afraid of—of God. But afterwards! Do you suppose Eve ever looked at a sunset, or watched the flight of a wild swan, or saw the moon pass over water, or heard the songs in the wind, without being reminded of the beauty and the music that she had lost? It is just that we feel—the echo of her eternal regret and hopeless longing."

"Hopeless longing!" she repeated faintly.

"Yes," he answered firmly, "but it is far better to have longings which you know to be hopeless than to have none at all. The man or woman who has ceased to long has ceased to live, and exists merely. If you can keep your ideals, the actual facts of your life matter much less."

"I don't think it is easy to keep ideals if one has too much money," she sighed.

"I dare say not. It must be such a temptation to suppose that the things money will buy are as good as the things that can't be bought. However, that is a form of temptation to which I have never been exposed." He smiled faintly. "Come," he added, after a pause, "I hate to hurry you, but I think we had better be getting on."

She smiled up at him, and made a little gesture with her hands towards the silver panorama of peaks which lay glittering around. "Good-bye, Eternity!" she said.

"Strange that you should say that, when eternity is just the one thing in life to which one can never bid adieu," he commented, with a sympathetic glance.

"Yes, I know. But I can dismiss eternity from my thoughts, and not be afraid of being myself dismissed from its infinite consciousness," she retorted, in the same half-playful, half-serious vein. "It is quite true what you said: I cannot bear it long. The glorious thought is that it will go on bearing me all the same."

He was about to speak eagerly, but he pulled himself up. With an evidently intentional return to the demeanour and speech of a servant, he remarked: "I think there never was anybody like my Fräulein."

Once more he had put himself and her back into their respective places, but this time she had no resentment.

They turned away from the moon into the black gully, and flashed their torches from side to side.

With many precautions they advanced, steadily but slowly, until they stood at the outer arch of the cave leading to the Gaura Draculuj.

Here they stopped, and the guide unwrapped a large package which he had been carrying carefully.

"It is the acetylene lamp off the motor," said he triumphantly. "I asked Reed to get it for me when he went down to Ildestadt yesterday."

"Oh, what a grand idea!" cried the girl. "You think of everything!"

"I am on a fool's errand," he answered hurriedly, "and all I can do to excuse myself to my own conscience is to take every precaution I can think of."

She sat down to watch him kindle the light, and soon its rays poured over them and over the rocky spot in which they found themselves. She leaned forward, her face earnest, her manner grave. "Esler, tell me the truth. Look at me, and tell me the truth. Do you think there is any reasonable possibility of our rousing the Black Dragon?"

He was kneeling on the grass beside her, and their

eyes were on a level. He faced her quietly enough. "No," he answered, "I do not. I have spent so many hours in the cave that I have grown almost sure that there is nothing there which could rise out of the abyss. If it were not for that one time, when some one moved the box and scattered fresh sand, I should be quite sure; but I tell myself that the some one who did this was almost certainly human. I know, in the bottom of my heart, that if I thought it in the least probable that there would be danger for you, I would not bring you."

She nodded. "I thought that was how it was. Well, I won't be too disappointed. But, you know, I have heard it laugh."

He smiled as if reluctantly. "Do you really think a dragon would be likely to laugh?"

"Then what is it?"

"Ah! What is it?"

He rose as he spoke lightly to his feet, and took up the flaming motor lamp. They entered the cave, and found untouched the first landmark left by Esler—Camiola's initials—upon the sandy floor. This was reassuring, since it had been placed so that no creature of any bulk could have passed in or out of the cave without erasing it. They went on in confidence, and he noted, as they advanced, that every smallest mark he had made was wholly intact. He crept first through the tunnel, into the cavern within, lit all the candles, and then allowed her to enter.

"The first thing I shall do," he said, "is to put you up there, out of danger, and fix this acetylene lamp beside you. Then, if I should by any wild chance, have to make a quick dash for safety, I shall be able to see exactly what I am doing." She agreed, and his plan was duly carried out, she being helped to climb to a point where a wide shelf of rock gave space upon which to sit. He arranged the lamp carefully upon a convenient projection above

her head, and laid the loaded gun in position. Then he unstrapped his rüeksack, containing food, Camiola's knitted coat, and other things, and laid that too aside.

"Now," said he, seating himself for a moment upon the edge of the shelf, "are you ready? Shall we begin our experiment?"

"Wait a moment," she whispered, laying a hand very lightly upon his shirt-sleeve. "Listen!"

For a moment they sat so, and heard—most unmistakably heard—a sound like a monster breathing in its sleep. Regularly it came and went, as regularly as respirations. Now and again it was punctuated by something very like a snore.

"There is something there," she whispered. "You hear it, don't you?"

"Yes. But I have heard it so often, and nothing happens. It may be the wind, whistling in through some crevice. You can feel it on your back, can't you?—the wind, I mean. There is a way up above there, out into the open, I am almost sure, and I think the wind comes sighing through this cave in that way, making the noise which the peasantry take for breathing."

"The wind," objected Camiola, "could not make it snore. There! Did you hear the odious laugh?" She gave a gasp which was almost a sob of excitement.

He looked earnestly at her. Unconsciously to herself her hand had closed upon his arm, and he was sensible of it through every thrilling nerve. "Shall we go home?" he whispered. "Let us! Why should you be frightened? I won't have it!"

That brought her up short. She released him with a start, and her eyes flashed. "You won't have it!" she cried, half vexed, half laughing. "It is for me, not you, to say what we will do, and you can't really think I am such an idiot as to come for nothing."

"Can you guarantee your nerve?" he entreated doubtfully. She held her wrist to him. "Feel my pulse if you like! I am as steady as this rock."

"If that is so, here goes," he replied; and slid down his rope like a monkey.

Curled upon her shelf she watched him eagerly. He had made a collection of big stones, and piled them conveniently near the mouth of the chasm, as used to be done by the guides during the brief time in which the cave had been shown to visitors. He chose a fairly small one first, and launched it from about the middle of the edge. It rolled over, and they heard it crash, first on one side, then the other, of the gulf, the thunder of its descent reverberating in the confined space, and dying away by slow degrees, until it merged in a confused noise of mingled sounds below. These sounds, which were best to be described as snarls or mutterings, died away by degrees, as the two in the cave listened, breathless.

Esler now took a larger stone, and rolled it in from a different point. Again they listened to its descent, with sounds like the former; but when it finally fell, no noise resulted. It simply died away into distance.

Two more were launched, with varying result, and Camiola's tension of nerve began to relax. In spite of the awe-inspiring circumstances which surrounded her, she was living in the twentieth century, and, after all, she must have known all the time that the dragon idea was ridiculous. When first they entered the cave, she had been the victim of an attack of panic. She felt trapped, shut in, with the evil thing lurking in the bowels of the earth. This now passed, and she cried out to Esler to roll down larger stones.

"I have been listening keenly," he said, "and it is true what old Hoffman said: the stones I put in at this end go down the farthest. I will send over this enormous

one, launching it at the extreme end; and if that has no result, we may as well go home again."

It was a block which he could but just set in motion, and it had taken him hours to roll it in from the outer cave where he had found it. He manœuvred it very carefully forwards, for, as has been said, the central portion of the floor of the cave sloped slightly towards the chasm. The moment the stone was on the slope, it seemed to escape from his control like a thing alive—if he did not wish to be carried with it, he must let go—and he jumped backward, watched by Camiola with her heart in her mouth, as the huge rock bounded on over the verge at the extreme end of the chasm, and plunged upon its downward course. They waited. Fainter and fainter grew the sounds; it was still descending; it had ceased to fall—no! Still they heard the echo of its mad career; now it was silent—no, not yet. Surely now. . . .

Then broke on the ear a sound they had not heard as yet—a hiss so loud, so piercing that it was almost like the steam whistle of a train. It grew louder, it was coming nearer; and Esler, after standing a moment like a man struck dumb, leaped across the cave for his life. Seizing his rope he swung himself up, yet climbed with his head over his shoulder, and hung upon the line, awaiting what should come. The hissing increased with incredible velocity, now smoke was arising from the pit—yes! Old Hoffman had told the truth. Smoke and such heat as could be felt were rushing upward. With a spring Esler gained the shelf where Camiola crouched.

The girl neither spoke nor moved, but fixed her eyes upon the mounting vapour.

With a roar it burst into view; it reared itself over the verge of the fissure. She saw—oh, merciful Heaven! *she saw* the shiny black column of its neck, the flat head, gleaming in the light!

Like one in a trance she was conscious that Esler had snatched up the elephant gun, and that a shot had gone booming, ricochetting against the walls of the cave. For just one second after the firing, the thing remained there in full sight, balanced in an awful, wobbling fashion, with lolling head, as though the shot had broken its neck. It was not six feet below the shelf on which they were placed. Then, at the moment when Esler desperately essayed a second shot, the awful neck darted forwards as a snake strikes, hit the opposite wall of the cave with a terrific impact, and seemed to Camiola to vanish in a cloud of smoke. Through the blinding heat and vapour, she heard Esler's voice, crying aloud in English:

"By God! *It's water! it's boiling water!* I have stopped up some vent below there!"

Only half conscious, she felt herself snatched up and thrown over his shoulder. He was hastening, gripping his rope with one hand, along a rock ledge which traversed the cave-side in an upward slope for some short distance. With instant perception that the horror of the moment had been too much for her, and that her brain was paralysed as it is in nightmares, he had not paused to parley, but simply climbed for their lives, since he did not know how high the boiling water might rise.

Staggering, clinging, striving, till his muscles stood out like cords and his breath hurt him as he drew it, he contrived to reach a higher spot where he could set her down. Then he turned, and surveyed what was beneath him.

The place was so full of steam that he could see nothing, but by the rays of light diffused through the vapour, he knew that the flood had not reached the shelf where their things were left. It took him but a minute to return thither, sliding down by means of the higher rope he had so providentially fixed up. Standing upon the ledge,

he fastened his rucksack to his back, and took up the lamp. He could now see that the water had wiped out the two rows of candles utterly, so it must be more than five feet deep; and he could hear from the swishing sound of it that it was moving round and round. A momentary gap in the shrouding mist gave him a shuddering glimpse of a black flood whirling with immense velocity. He dared give no second glance, but reascended to the place where he had left the girl.

She was sitting up when he rejoined her, and her dilated eyes and wild, helpless look struck terror to his heart. He was cursing himself for a rash fool, but this was not the moment for apologies or regrets, or for anything but instant action. Somehow he must get her up yet higher, and they were now at the limit of the rope. Above, the cave wall seemed to be quite perpendicular, and if they slipped upon the rock's damp surface, they would both suffer the fate which had doubtless overtaken the unhappy tourists. They would be *boiled alive*.

It seemed to him a merciful thing that Miss France was apparently not in a state to appreciate the situation fully.

Forcing himself to be steady and not to hurry, he detached the rope he had so carefully fixed. The process seemed to him to take hours, and as he worked he thought he could hear the suck of the unseen whirlpool more distinctly. When he had the coil in his hand, he bent over his companion and spoke in English, slowly, clearly: "You will not move till I come back. Do you hear? Can you understand?"

She assented by a motion of the head, and he set himself to his work, moving along, feeling for hand and foot-hold in a desperation which consolidated itself into a mighty calm.

In after years the thought of that climb, if it came to

him, even in happiest hours, would bring the sweat to his forehead and set his heart knocking. No less than four times did he slip, and each time recover himself as by a miracle. The condensed steam was now pouring in trickles off the rock, rendering it terribly precarious. Below he had left the girl, and he did not know whether he or the agonising death would reach her first. He had deposited the lamp beside her that the horror of darkness might not be added to her plight. It still burned, so all was well, so far.

Just as he was beginning to despair of finding any foothold, let alone resting-place, upon the formidable bastion of rock, he found that his hand, extended to grope, was slipping over a kind of lip. Raising himself with a new hope he crawled over, and found himself in a place of vantage. The cave at this point sloped gently upward and backward, in a long shoot, or arched tunnel, strewn with loose stones, where evidently at times flood water poured through.

If he could get his companion up here they were saved. Would time and strength suffice for the wild venture?

To his unspeakable thankfulness, he found a jagged tooth of rock strong enough to hold the rope. Inspired with his new hope he secured it with speed and effectively. Then, still with extreme caution, he let himself down bit by bit until he was able to reach the girl and the lamp.

The sound of the swirling water was certainly plainer now—the heat appalling. He guessed that the mass of mineral matter spewed forth in the first burst must have silted up—altogether or in part—the tunnel of exit, so that the torrent was mounting more quickly than it could pour away.

He stooped over the brink, and drew up a bit of the lower rope. The part which had been immersed was so hot that it almost scalded his fingers. Hacking off a

length with his knife, he bade the girl stand up, and lashed her to his back. Then he secured the noose of the upper rope round them both, so that, even should he slip, they would, by God's grace, fall only the length of the cord. He gave her some instructions rapidly, hardly knowing what he said. Then, fighting back the thought of what lay below, or the realisation of his own foolhardy daring, saying to himself, "There is no other way," he set himself to scale the rock, carrying her thus.

If he let go, and if the rope broke with the sudden strain of their combined weight, there awaited them a fate too horrible for contemplation.

Some part of Camiola's brain must have been working, for she did exactly what he told her, making use of any small leverage to relieve him of a part of her weight, and seeming to find hand-hold where he had found none. The sweat was pouring off him, his shirt was wringing wet with the steam, as though he were in a Turkish bath. The stifling heat seemed to drain his strength, the awful, dank smell produced hardly controllable nausea. But he kept on doggedly, desperately, telling himself, in endless repetition: "If I fail, we are both lost!"

Just as he thought his heart would burst—just as the rope seemed to bite to the very bone of his lacerated hands, they reached the lip of the shoot. Camiola leaned an elbow upon it, levered herself up, hung on with all her might, and somehow, in an unseemly scramble, of which afterwards he never liked to think, he found that they were both over the edge.

For a minute he crouched there on hands and knees, while terrible pants, like sobs, shook him. Then he summoned all his resolution, felt for the knots that bound her to him, and slowly succeeded in untying them.

Staggering to his feet, he seized a bit of her gown, and dragged her with him up the shoot, stumbling among

the loose stones, until they reached a point where he felt sure she would be safe for the moment.

"You must sit down and wait here," he told her hoarsely, "while I go back once more—just once more—for the lamp."

This had been too large for him to dare attempt to bring it up with them. But he felt he ought to return and fetch it. The pain in his hands was so acute that he was half afraid to try his weight upon the rope again. Yet that was contemptible. He crept to the verge, and sat down, tearing his handkerchief in two, winding it round his wounds, and securing it with his sailor neatness—that ability to tie a rope so that it would hold, which had saved two lives that night. As he sat he could hear the roar and bubble of the flood, like a beast baulked of its prey. The steam was still so thick that he could not see anything below, except the radiance of the acetylene beams illumining the vapour; and even as he gazed, suddenly *the light went out*. Darkness fell over all.

The water had already reached the place they had so lately left!

So narrow a plank between themselves and that eternity upon which they could not bear to gaze too long!

He found, to his surprise, that the thing struck him as funny. He even began to laugh a little, feebly at first, as he brushed aside, with hands that shook, the moisture which streamed from his forehead down into his eyes. Then he realised that if he once gave way to laughter he would yell. He could fancy his own voice ringing through the pitch black cave in wild peals of mirthless cachinnation. The thought recalled him to Miss France. She would be afraid, if she heard him making a fool of himself. She was probably afraid now of the sudden darkness. He pulled his small electric lamp from his pocket, and dragged his weary feet back to her through the stones.

By the time he reached her, he had succeeded in controlling the muscles of his mouth, and he said, in a trembling voice: "We were only just in time."

She lifted pathetic eyes to his, and held her hands to the sides of her head. "We have been in danger, haven't we?" she said stumblingly, using her own language.

He could see that she was not herself, but the sound of her voice, asking a rational question, reassured him a little.

"Yes, but I think we are safe now. To make sure, however, let us go on a little farther."

He picked up the rucksack, and motioned to her to follow him. She did so, obediently and in complete silence.

CHAPTER XXIV

ESLER HOLDS OUT

THE girl's thin garments, like his own, were drenched with steam as though she had been immersed in water. Down the tunnel they were ascending came a distinct draught of air. While they were still moving, they were not so sensible of it; but when at last they paused, quite worn out, for a rest, the wind blew keenly upon their damp bodies through their summer clothing.

"We had better not stop here," said Esler uneasily, "we shall catch our death."

"Oh, please let me stop," pleaded the girl's voice meekly. "I—I don't quite know why, but I feel as if I could not move. The—the awful thing can't get us here, can it?"

"No, no," he answered, "we are safe enough here, I am sure."

"Then I must wait—a little," she almost whispered. "I will go on soon—as soon as I can."

He looked round. Presently he spied a recess in the rock where they would be screened from the down-draught which traversed the chimney.

Stooping down and feeling the ground, he found that it was covered with a dry and faded moss. He led her thither, and made her sit down. Then, unfastening the rucksack, he took out her coat and wrapped her in it. He produced a flask of wine, and made her drink. She did so obediently. He filled up the cup and drank himself, where her lips had touched.

That did him good, and he began to collect his thoughts, and to try and decide what he must immediately do.

The shoot, some way up which they were now situated, was in shape rather like the trumpet of a gramophone, widening out immensely at the mouth. The Gaura Draculuj at that height was at least twice as wide as it was on the level of the cave floor. The water must spread so far when it reached the lip of the shoot that he thought it almost certain that it could not rise much higher, especially as it must by now be escaping, to some degree, through the low tunnel of entrance. They had ascended at least a hundred feet up among the loose stones; and he was so utterly exhausted by his recent effort that his very limbs were shaking.

Above them, as he could see by turning the beam of his torch upward, the tunnel grew much smaller. He looked doubtfully at the girl, who was leaning against the rock, quite motionless, but with widely opened eyes, which seemed to see something invisible.

"Fräulein," he said softly, speaking in German now, "do you feel ill?"

She turned then, and looked at him fully, passing her hand over her brow. "There is such a pain in my head," she faltered. "What has happened? I am so cold and wet."

He took his own coat out of the rucksack and approached her. "I am going to climb higher, and see what is up there," he said reassuringly, though he was devoured with a terrible anxiety. "Meanwhile, you lie down here and rest. You are perfectly safe. Have you your own lamp?"

She had it with her, but on account of the powerful light of the motor lamp she had not needed hitherto to use it. She now produced it, and he fixed it alight.

"I won't leave you in the dark," he said. He scraped

up handfuls of the dry moss and withered vegetation—remains of some inundation—which grew in the depression of the rock, and made her a sort of pillow with the empty rucksack laid over them. Then, bidding her lie down, he covered her with his coat, and, promising to return as quickly as he could, he went on up the shaft. For some distance it was large enough for him to walk upright. Then he had to creep, and the pain of his hands made his progress severely penitential. The fresh, cool air which blew down convinced him that he was not following a blind alley; and before very long he had wriggled himself out of a jagged-edged hole, and saw the stars.

He returned with a lightened heart, and much quicker than he had gone. He had been away about half an hour.

He found Camiola sleeping deeply and calmly. She was curled up in what looked like a restful attitude, and appeared both warm and comfortable. If she was safe, it seemed more humane to leave her where she was. To ascertain whether this was wise, he crept carefully down all the way to the lip of the shoot, and found the volume of steam less. He could still hear the water, and the heat was still great, but he was practically certain that not only had the flood not risen since he last examined it, but that it had perhaps fallen slightly.

If it had not risen, it was fair to assume that it would not now come any higher. No doubt it had, by its own force, washed a passage clear for itself below, and was now escaping almost as fast as it rose.

Once more he dragged himself back to the niche where he had left Miss France. Still she slept, and he felt it might be unwise to awaken her. She had suffered acute shock, and nature was avenging herself. He sat stiffly down, his back propped against a rock, his arms folded.

The rays of the lamp showed him her delicate little profile, which looked very young and soft and childish

in the relaxation of sleep. Her hair lay in rings, damp on her white forehead; her lashes showed dark and thick upon her pale cheek.

For some minutes he sat, chin propped on hand, gazing at her. Her failure of nerve had surprised him, but it had also given a new aspect to his feeling for her. She seemed a being in need of cherishing and tenderness. There was no trace at all of the spoilt, domineering heiress in this helpless, badly frightened girl.

With a little start Camiola awoke. For a long minute she did not know where she was, nor what had awakened her. She perceived a grey glimmer of twilight and two tiny green lamps at about the level of her own eyes. Lying without motion, she made out the shape of something that crept on all fours, something that showed patches of black and white—an animal of some kind. How came an animal, with eyes that gleamed in the dark, in her own bedroom? She made a movement, lifted a hand; like a shadow the creature was gone, melting into the surrounding gloom.

Was she still asleep? Her pillow must have got pushed away, for she was cramped and stiff and aching. She raised herself cautiously into a sitting posture and felt about her. Though the light was dim, she could, after a while, distinguish objects, and by degrees her surroundings impressed themselves upon her.

She was sheltered in a niche, behind a projection of rock, and beyond this nook a rocky passage sloped upward, making a shaft down which there slanted a ray of faint light.

Quite near her Esler sat, his back propped against the rock, in the profound slumber of complete physical exhaustion. His electric torch was on his knee, his revolver lay under his hand.

He was very white, almost green, he wore only his shirt and knee breeches, and his hands were bound in bloody rags. His head was thrown back, showing the fine lines of his throat and the slope of the muscles along his athletic shoulders. She touched his hand. It was so icy cold that for a moment she feared he might be dead. His coat had been used to cover her, and she felt a movement of remorse which almost brought tears.

She snatched up the garment and wrapped it carefully about him, then hurriedly searched the pile of things he had taken from the rucksack, and found food and wine. Memory was alert now; she remembered all that had happened up to the moment of the incredible apparition of the Black Dragon. She recalled her own annihilating terror, the pounce of the wicked black head, the thundering noise, the blinding smoke—and a voice that had cried: "It's water! Boiling water!"

Boiling water! She sat back upon her heels, staring at him. How they had got to the place wherein they found themselves she knew not.

Her movements awoke him, and he sat up with a cry. "I—I've not been to sleep," he stammered confusedly; "only closed my eyes a minute—kept a look out!"

She turned upon him a look of affectionate reproach, shaking her head as at a froward child. "You kept me warm at your own cost," she said. "You are as cold as a stone, and I am much displeased."

The blood rushed over his strained, white face. She was herself again—the Camiola he knew. Also, her thought was for him.

"I ought not to have slept," he stammered; "but since you are safe—" He made an effort to rise.

"Sit still," she said. "Drink this"—she held out the cup—"and tell me what you have done to your hands."

He was glad of the wine, and thanked her gratefully.

"That's nothing," he added, glancing at his fingers; "they only got a bit chafed by the rope. We had to climb, you know."

She sat staring at him remorsefully. "Oh, Esler, what did I do? I, who guaranteed my nerve. Did I faint?"

"Do you remember what happened?" he asked curiously.

She puckered her brow in an effort to recall exactly what she did remember. "I saw—I saw the dragon," she whispered. "Its head came shooting out of the pit, with a long neck—yards long! There was smoke and heat, and it struck the opposite wall, and you called out: 'It's boiling water!'" She looked at him curiously. He seemed just as usual, allowing for his pallor and the most unusual disorder of his appearance.

"Well," he said, "what next?"

"I hardly remember. I suppose I must have fainted. When I first remember anything I was tied to you, and you were undoing the knots. My head hurt, and I was wet. Did I fall into the water?"

"Thank God, no. If you had"—suddenly his voice broke, he leaned forward and hid his face in his hands—"if you had——"

After a pause she whispered: "Was it really boiling water?"

"Yes."

"What became of it?"

"It rushed into the cave, and filled it with a sort of whirlpool. The force was so tremendous that I suppose it could not find its way out. It rose and rose——"

She drew a long breath. "We have been in terrible danger."

"As near death as any two could be without dying," he answered. And after a long, solemn silence he asked wistfully:

"Can you forgive me?"

"Forgive you? For saving my life?"

"For bringing you into such awful danger."

"The danger was my doing," she answered. "The rescue was yours."

"To put it like that is just your angel-goodness." He was too much moved to say more.

Presently she spoke again. "At least, we have pierced the heart of the mystery," she began, then checked herself and gave a cry so sudden and piercing that he sprang to his feet, thinking the water must be rising still. "Oh, I beg your pardon, I could not help it; the thought struck me like a stab! *Was that what happened to them*—to those poor souls who were lost?"

He knelt down and spoke soothingly. "Obviously it was what happened to them, only the guide on that occasion did not, I suppose, do the trick as thoroughly as I did last night. There must be a boiling spring down there, and I stopped up its course. It collected in the tube, and was thrust up by the enormous pressure of the water behind. Yes, the same thing doubtless happened then. They were caught like rats in a trap. The water rushed up, swept round, gathered them all in, and then, having somehow got rid of the obstructing stone, sank again, with them in its clutches, leaving only the silt and fine sand deposit behind it. Its own fierce heat dried everything up, so that two days later there was no sign of anything having happened out of the way."

"No, no," she sobbed, wringing her hands, "that's too awful! I can't believe it! Oh, think what a death! What a death! . . . And those poor little bits of things you found!"

"Yes. I suppose during those weeks that I did not come here—at the time when my box was washed away and the new deposit came up—there must have been an overflow of some kind. It was in the springtime, when

all the streams are flooded, and something must have got into the hot spring which partly stopped it up for a few hours. I expect it was then that a bit of rock gave way down below and let the bones through into that cave where Conrad went."

There was no answer but her tears.

"Fräulein, it must have been a quick death—very rapid; they cannot have been for long in pain," he suggested pleadingly.

"And that is the death we only just escaped last night?" she cried.

He assented.

"Let us be quiet a minute and thank God," she sobbed.

So they knelt side by side in silence for a while, and she managed to subdue her weeping.

"What time is it now?" she whispered presently.

He found his watch unbroken in his breeches pocket. "I wound it up before we started," he remarked. "It is now a quarter past five."

"How are we going to get home?" she asked.

"We can get out up above, Fräulein. I ascertained that, before betraying my trust and sleeping at my post. Even if the water has gone down, which I doubt—I am afraid I stopped it up too completely—we could not descend that way without very great difficulty. But before we set off, I will go and look down and see what is happening."

"Let me come too," she begged. And they rose and descended the shoot together as far as the edge.

All below them was dark as Erebus, but they could hear the slapping and clucking of water. Esler held his torch as far out as he could, but only curling mist was to be seen. "I'm afraid the motor lamp is gone," he avowed regretfully. "I intended to go back for it, but I was too late; the water reached it first."

"Esler," she cried passionately, "how could you do it? How could you get me up this place?"

"I don't know. I was half mad, I think. The courage of despair," he returned with a curious smile. "Come, let us get home as fast as we can."

He rose and pointed up the shaft.

"See! There is a perceptible beam of light coming down! The hole is big enough for you to be able to get out, and I think I know about where we shall find ourselves. But before we start let us eat some breakfast."

They went back to their niche, and while she spread out the food she told him how she had been awakened by the visit of a weird black and white person with green eyes.

"A badger," he told her; "there are plenty hereabouts, and they bite like fiends. I am glad he was afraid of you! Luckily they are the shyest beasts ever made. But it makes me all the more ashamed to think that I fell asleep while on guard."

"I don't wonder you did! Tired is a poor word to express what you must have felt."

"Oh, it wasn't tired! It was the horror! I don't mean the horror of the thing itself, but your collapse and the dread lest I should not be able to save you. For a time I really did think we were hopelessly trapped and should share the fate of those others."

"I can't think what happened to me," she said wonderingly.

"You said your head pained you. I was horribly alarmed. I thought the shock had been too much for your brain. Have you any pain in your head now?"

"A bad headache, but those I often have. Food will do it good."

They sat down accordingly, ate and drank, and felt immeasurably refreshed. When they had done, Esler packed

up all with his accustomed neatness, though he could really hardly use his hands. Camiola, who had a length of bandage with her in the little wallet she carried at her waist, urgently begged to be allowed to bind them up more scientifically, but he refused on the ground that the blood had now caked upon them, and would be better undisturbed until the wounds could be bathed.

She gave in, and they set out to breast the slope. The loose stones made it a nasty climb, and when the hole grew small it was anything but pleasant going. The air and the increasing light, however, cheered her on, and at last they emerged into the glorious pearly dawn, on a desolate mountain side, whereon Camiola, by herself, would have been hopelessly lost.

Esler, however, knew his bearings, and after a long scramble, during which they were obliged once or twice to retrace their steps, they came out upon the path to the summit, a little above Mezo Bolo, whence the descent home was easy.

They sat down to rest for a few minutes beside the way, for they had been doing strenuous work, and had been obliged to face some awkward bits of scrambling which he would have wished to spare her.

They both looked more natural now—the colour had come back to Esler's face, and Camiola's eyes had lost their pathetic stare. They were both oddly dishevelled, and their clothes, hands and faces caked with whitish mud and flecked with green smears.

There had been a long silence between them, when suddenly the girl turned to him and spoke in a puzzled way:

“But you said it in English!”

He jumped perceptibly. “I beg your pardon, Fräulein?”

"You said: '*It's water! It's boiling water!*' I know you did; I remember it clearly."

He smiled, looking down at his knees. "It is my misfortune that I have no English," he said primly.

Camiola contemplated him. He had not changed colour, and he sat quite still. His mouth was set obstinately.

The tears rushed into her eyes. She turned her head from him, and tried to swallow them down. After all they had been through together, after their having looked death in the face, still he shut her out, still he lied to her, still he acted a part before her.

She had been through a great deal, was exhausted, and not quite mistress of herself, and she trembled on the brink of an outburst. She controlled herself, however. She had her pride. Slipping down from the stone whereon she sat, she told him briefly that she was going on.

They proceeded in silence some short way. Then Esler paused. "We must leave the path here," he said, "and go through the wood—that is, if you wish to get in by the secret stair without being seen."

She followed him, with a bare assent, and went on, still not speaking. She could see that her silence disturbed him, for he several times looked anxiously, half pleadingly, at her. She disregarded this completely, and thus they passed together through the fairyland of the birch wood, while the sun peeped over the peaks and slanted down upon the beauty of the Ildenthal.

Suddenly Camiola paused and gave a little cry.

He was going before in order to be ready to help her in steep bits of the descent, and he looked back quickly. "What is it?" he asked anxiously.

"A sudden, sharp, mysterious pain," she faltered in English, holding her hand to her side.

"Where?" he cried in German.

Camiola threw back her head and laughed tauntingly in his face.

"So I have proved you a liar," she said bitterly. "I spoke in English, and you understood perfectly. Not that it matters much. Only it is as well to be sure."

He was for a moment overcome. He hung his head, while the crimson colour rushed to his face. Then he made a passionate gesture.

"Yes, it is true," he said quietly in English. "I am a liar and a hypocrite. I do both speak and understand English."

"Then why," cried Camiola, "why conceal it? What was the good of such a thing?"

"You saw me as a peasant," he muttered sullenly. "You took me for a peasant. I wished you to do so, and I knew that as long as I spoke only German you would not detect that I was something different. If you heard me speak English, as now, you would have known—you must have known—that I do not belong to the lower classes; and as I am living like a workman, earning only a workman's wages, it was intolerable to my pride that you should know me for what I am. It was still more intolerable that the other men should. I thought I could carry it through all right. I would have done, only—"

"Only what?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Only something happened which I had not foreseen," he remarked grimly. "Now you have dragged out my secret, and you can give me away to the others."

"If you want me to respect your confidence," she said, "you should confide in me. On the contrary, you have done all you can to deceive me."

"That is not quite just. I have kept from you only my private concerns. I have served you as faithfully as

I could. I cannot see that it really matters to you whether I speak English or not."

She stood listening, and her lip quivered. "I will try," she remarked, "not to take any interest in you, since that, apparently, is what you do not like."

He made a small sound, indicative of distress, but did not speak for a minute. At last he said, as if to encourage himself: "It is only for another week."

She looked up. "Another week?"

"I am going away," he murmured, staring at the ground.

Camiola felt a most disconcerting sinking of the heart. "Going away in a week?"

"Yes. I have a job—a better job. I am leaving my—aunt. You will not, I hope, be inconvenienced by my going. I have arranged with the under gardener to do my work here."

Camiola went slowly onward as if her feet moved mechanically, without her will. There had come to her a flash of insight, and she saw clearly that Esler had much better go—the sooner the better.

"If that is so," she told him, "there is no more to be said. I shall repeat nothing of what you inadvertently allowed me to discover just now. As you point out, it is no concern of mine."

"That is like your usual goodness," he said humbly. "I owe you more than I could repay in a lifetime."

"I think you repaid it last night," she replied coldly. "I fail to see what I have done for you in any way. I have wanted to help and sympathise, but you have shut me out."

Even as she spoke she was telling herself how unwise she was to talk to him like this.

"Yes," he replied huskily. "I have shut you out, I am glad to say. It has been hard, but I have done it. I

thought to-night would be the last time, and that I could go on doing it just till this morning." He took a great breath, and looked at her with hard, flashing eyes and a heightened colour. "In spite of what has happened to-night I am going to hold out still," he said, very low. "You wouldn't have me behave like a—like a—cad?"

She met his look. Something passed between them—some message—she hardly knew what. She only knew that he was offering her the chance of safety, that the present moment was fraught with danger, that she was weak, and that he was taking pity on her weakness. To-morrow she would be glad—yes, glad to have been saved from madness.

"You are right," she said, almost inaudibly. "You and I have nothing to say to each other."

"Good-bye," he muttered breathlessly.

They were not home yet, but she knew what he meant. All was to be finished now. She gave him her hand. He took it, raised his cap from his curly fair head, and bent over the grubby little fingers. She felt his lips, gentle and considerate.

Then, with a slight bow, he let fall her hand, replaced his cap, turned his back, and went on.

CHAPTER XXV.

RED BROCADE

"A QUARTER to eight, miss," observed Marston, flinging back the casement curtains and letting in the glory of the morning.

"Oh, Marston, please draw those curtains! I can't bear the light! My head aches like everything!"

"Why, what is the matter? You were very well last night?" demanded Marston in displeasure, coming to the beside. "Shall I bring you some aspirin?"

"No, thanks. I got up and took some a while ago. Give me a cup of tea; that will do me more good than anything, and I won't get up for an hour or so."

Marston laid her hand upon the girl's forehead, and remarked that she had no fever. "But what in the world have you done with your arm?" she cried in consternation, pointing to a long mark, partly cut, partly graze, partly scratch, which streaked the white flesh for several inches.

"Perfectly disgusting," said Camiola fretfully. "I did it against the bedpost, reaching over in the dark. I didn't know it was so bad!"

"Dear, dear—there must be a nail in the wood," fumed Marston. "However came you to be so clumsy? Did you knock your head against it too? Here's a nasty little cut on your forehead."

"Oh, I did that yesterday against a rock in the garden. It never rains but it pours, you know, Marston. Did you ever in your life knock yourself about that you did not

infallibly repeat the process within the next few hours? Oh-h-h, I do feel so stupid! Pour out my tea and let me go to sleep again."

"I'll just get some hot water and bathe that nasty scratch," said Marston, as she prepared the hot and fragrant cup. "It looks quite angry, that it does, and a nice thing it would be to have your arm scarred just above the wrist where it shows so badly."

She moved about the room, preparing a fomentation, and finding lint and boracic ointment. "Goodness me, how you carry up the mould and such out of the garden, miss! Here's a lump of soil on your nice rug as big as a walnut."

"Oh, Marston, what a fuss you are making this morning just because I tell you I feel seedy! Do please leave off talking and draw the curtains."

Marston obeyed with an ill grace. She did not like her young mistress to have headaches. It was unlike her. She finished her bandaging of the arm, and went on into Miss Purdon's room to grumble to her of the fluctuating condition of Miss France's health and temper.

Camiola sipped her tea, with wide eyes that saw nothing outwardly. She was confronting all the time, in thought, the set lips and obstinate jaw of a young man who was going away in a week.

Why, she asked herself, had she been so weak, so ineffectual? Why had she not insisted upon an explanation from him?

She knew that it was because she was overwhelmed with a torrent of sensations to which, so far, she had been a stranger. The ground had been giving way under her feet. Her gay confidence in life, her absorption in the present moment, her vehement interest in the Black Dragon, and the secret of the Great Disappearance—all alike were whelmed and smothered under the weight of

this new emotion which was tearing at her heart strings.

What Esler had said was true. As long as she took him for a Transylvanian peasant she had been safe. No amount of interest, however keen, in a peasant would have struck her as dangerous—as likely to interfere for a moment with her peace of mind. When he spoke to her as an equal—using her own tongue with the ease of a native and the purity of a gentleman—all was changed.

They were faced with a problem, and he decided that it was better for her not to resolve it. He took the decision into his own hands—he assumed the responsibility. He was going away, and she knew it was because he dared not stay. "*I thought to-night would be the last time—I am going to hold out.*"

The words rang in her ears. They told her, without explicit confession, that the fascination he had from the first exerted over her had been mutual. His apparent hostility, his coldness, his reticence, had been only the armour which he wore—the shield he interposed between himself and her.

He was an Englishman here in obscurity; it followed, then, in hiding. This thought brought an uncomfortable colour to her face. What could an educated Englishman be doing in this remote spot, passing as a peasant, passing as Frau Esler's nephew?

There must be something to account for such a state of things. Who could he be? It seemed most unlikely that Frau Esler would do for any casual stranger what she was doing for this young man. He could not really be her nephew. Then who was he? Could he by any chance be a member of the other branch of the family?

Otho had told her that his mother had an elder sister, who married what he described as an English Predikant named Westonhaugh. She had been boycotted by her

aristocratic family in consequence. Could this young man be her son?

A moment's reflection showed this to be a most unlikely conjecture. Mrs. Westonhaugh had displeased her family by her marriage, but it was a valid marriage for all that. If young Esler were her son, then he was heir of Orenfels in place of Otho, and there seemed no conceivable reason for his concealing his identity.

No, that was nonsense. He must be something different. She could only suppose that he was a social outcast of some kind, who, seeking a hiding-place, had come upon Orenfels, and had so kindled the affections of Frau Esler that she consented to pass him off as her nephew and give him an asylum. The spot was so isolated that they might well look upon the risk of discovery as but slight. The theory accounted for the Frau's avowed displeasure when the castle was let, her unwillingness to allow Esler to come into contact with the English visitors, and so on.

Then there broke upon Camiola's mind the fact of the concealed woman who had been ill. In immediate succession to this, the doctor's visit, the cry of the newborn infant which she had heard.

The answer to a part of her puzzle stared her in the face. Esler was a married man. The child was his child. She remembered the exaltation with which he had answered her inquiry as to the health of the patient. She remembered his face as she had seen it in her dream, full of joy and triumph.

No wonder he had felt that the intercourse between himself and her must cease! She had shown him—yes, actually shown him—glimpses of what she felt! Her hands clenched, her face crimsoned as she thought of this. She flung herself prone upon her pillows, hid her eyes, shook with mortification and rage. She wished with all her heart that Otho had not taken it upon himself to

go away just at that time! She would have engaged herself to him within the next few hours had he been at hand! She was filled with a wild desire to announce herself as engaged and see how Esler looked, how he took it, if it hurt him!

Ah, what a fool she was! How she had put herself into this man's power! How she had let him see—what?

She went feverishly back in memory, through the incidents of their acquaintance, through the hours they had passed together. She came to the conclusion that if she had betrayed her feeling it was not to the same extent to which he had betrayed his.

He had owned his temptation. Hers may have been implied, but it was not admitted. For this, at least, she was grateful to him.

What now remained to do was to forget him as fast as possible and to cultivate Otho. She could not but believe that she might have Otho if she chose to give the necessary encouragement. In their last walk together he had sought an opening not once, but repeatedly. Next time he should have better luck.

In reflections of this kind she lost herself. They blotted out the memory of the strenuous hours passed in the cave. The horrible solution of the mystery, which they had demonstrated so unexpectedly, faded into the background of her thoughts.

She wrestled only with the detestable fact that there had sprung up within her a feeling of surprising strength, and that this feeling must be stamped upon, crushed out, abolished. How could such a state of mind have come about? How was it that, all unknown to her, the thing had grown so huge, had flung its roots so wide? She suspected that no future affair could have the poignancy of this—that the man she would marry, whoever he might be, could never awaken in her such intensity of feeling

as had been called to life by this man she could never marry.

"So all the wretched novels are right," she thought despairingly. "They always tell you this. I am supposed to be free to choose, to be able to marry as pleases me best. And it is a vain boast. I cannot marry as I choose. I shall probably end by marrying some one to whom only half of me, or less, can ever belong."

It sounded very tragic, so tragic that it brought the tears flowing. Seldom, indeed, was it that Camiola wept; and on this occasion she made her pillow quite wet.

Mizpah knocked by and by to know whether she might come in, and was pettishly refused. Camiola cried herself to sleep.

She woke about midday, feeling more normal. She drank some soup, had her bath, and dressed. She would not admit Marston until she had clothed herself completely, for her body bore marks of more abrasions and bruises than could be at all accounted for by any amount of ingenious fibbing.

The sound of merry voices from the tennis-court without came to her ears as she sat at her toilet-table, and made her think how lonely she was—how far outside the easy lives of these happy young people.

She had taken the precaution, when she crept into her room that morning, to brush out her hair and pick the bits of moss from it. But Marston, as she smoothed and coiled it, paused now and then to examine the white scalp in a most annoying way, and once contemplated something in the brush so earnestly that Camiola grew quite nervous.

The maid said nothing, however, and about a quarter of an hour before the lunch horn blew the mistress of the castle strolled out upon the terrace.

She was greeted with welcoming shouts. Mizpah, it appeared, had heard from Otho, and he said he had secured his leave and should be back by Monday next.

Camiola, with joy, seized upon this method of diverting her thoughts. Since the return of von Courland was assured, she would send out her cards for the party at once. She summoned both the girls to help in the business, and they set to work directly after lunch, dispatching Erwald down to Ildestadt to catch the evening post with the notes.

Camiola then decided that she would make an early start the following morning with Reed, take the car, and go to Hermannstadt, to order all that she needed in the way of decorations and provisions such as were not procurable in Ildestadt. This, she thought, would be an excellent opportunity for replacing the lost acetylene lamp. There was a motor garage of a kind there where some things could be procured.

The whole party, after lunch, proceeded up to the garret floor, to reconnoitre and decide exactly what Herr Neumann must be asked to supply.

Camiola, on this occasion, merely asked Frau Esler for the key, which was very grudgingly handed over. The party made a great noise, and Conrad rushed up and down the passages, and swung from the beams of the roof in the loose-boxes, as he called them; the baby, however, made no sound. It slept through everything.

In the course of their discoveries they came upon a chest in which the key had been left. Camiola, opening it, found it to be full of clothes.

They were very carefully folded and laid away with camphor, and were, apparently, extremely old.

Upon being taken out and unfolded they proved to be court dresses of the early eighteenth or late seventeenth century. There were three complete costumes for men

and three for ladies. Camiola was inspired by the idea of dressing up in them for dinner that night. Eagerly she took them out, one by one, and eagerly the others examined, appraised them, and held them up to see whom they would best fit. Even Bassett was quite enthusiastic on the subject.

At the very bottom of the chest Camiola came upon a red gown. It was of brocade, and was of a different fashion from the others, which were sacque and petticoat costumes. This was in fashion more like the style which we used to call "princess"—clinging tightly to the figure as far down as the hips, and flowing thence in folds. It was cut square at the top, and edged with delicate gold embroidery, which was hardly tarnished.

The funny thing about it was that Camiola felt sure she had seen the dress before—even that she had worn it. She knelt there, with the thing in her hands, smoothing it over, and recalling to herself the fact that she had lifted the flowing train, and put it over her arm on some occasion which she remembered perfectly.

Then suddenly she knew. It was in her dream. When Esler had entered her room by the secret door, and she had arisen from bed and followed him, she had worn this brocade gown. That seemed incredible.

She looked wistfully from one of the girls to the other, from Irmgard, her own devoted friend, to Betty, who was growing dear to her, and wondered why she could not tell either of them about this curious dream or about her knowledge of the red gown.

Her decision that this was the one she would wear was greeted with delight by the others, for both Betty and Irmgard were wildly anxious to see themselves in sacque and petticoat. They decided to wear powder, and do the thing properly, and presently flew downstairs to call Marston and the nice girl, Rahula, who waited upon the

two young ladies, and see what tuckers or stitches were necessary to make the dresses wearable.

Of the three, Camiola's red brocade turned out to be the one that fitted the best. It must have been worn by a woman of much her height and size. Camiola decided that powder could not be worn with a gown of that shape, but that her hair should be clubbed at the back of her neck with a black velvet bow.

The fortunate find kept them interested and busy all the afternoon, and by degrees the stiffness of Camiola's limbs wore off, and she regained some of her elasticity, both of body and mind. They had tea upon the lawn, and afterwards lay about on the grass, reading novels until the time came to go and don the costumes feloniously abstracted from the family stores.

It was a party worthy of the old traditions of Orenfels which descended the stairs to dine that night.

Esler, who had not appeared all day, was at his post at the buffet as they came down, and Camiola, without seeming to look at him, saw him grow perfectly white and watch her descent as though he had received a violent shock.

"Hallo, Esler," cried Conrad loudly, "don't fall off your perch with horror because the girls have been thieving! You shouldn't let them loose up there in the garrets among the old chests!"

"Conrad!" said Mizpah reprovingly, "be quiet. You know perfectly well that Captain von Courland would be only too delighted to see his family costumes set off to such advantage. Had I not felt absolutely sure of his consent, I should have begged Camiola not to use the things."

"I don't see that his consent much matters," replied Camiola carelessly, almost recklessly. "He can't kill us because we have dressed up in these old things. He need

never know, in fact, that we did it. We can put them all away again to-morrow."

"Oh, but I should like to see Otho, too, dressed up," cried Conrad eagerly. "There are some more things in another chest, 'Miola, and I want us to have another dress-up evening when he comes back to celebrate the occasion."

"That's quite a good idea, Con," cried Camiola. "Captain von Courland has just the face and figure to look well in these clothes."

"Yes, hasn't he?" cried Betty, and checked herself, blushing.

"I shall be very pleased when he returns," remarked Miss Purdon. "We seem to be an incomplete party without him."

She privately thought that the state of matters was clearly proved by Camiola's freakish behaviour. If the affair really was to come off, it would be as well to take it philosophically.

That evening, while the young people were playing "Coon-can," Miss Purdon had occasion to go to her room for something. She heard a movement in Camiola's room, the door of communication being open, and after a minute Marston came to the entrance and said in a low voice:

"Is that you, Miss Purdon?"

"Yes. Is anything the matter, Marston?"

"Come in here a minute, miss."

Mizpah went in. Upon a table Marston had laid out the clothes in which Camiola had been to the Gaura Draculuj. There was a skirt simply caked with dirt, and stiff and wrinkled as though it had been wringing wet. There was a pair of boots scratched, muddy, and still damp. There was a knitted coat, clammy and smeared with the greenish moisture which runs off trickling walls

—torn also, and what Marston described as “thoroughly messed up.”

“I think, miss, it is only right I should show you these,” said the woman in a low voice. “All this has been done between the time Miss France went to bed last night and the time she got up this morning.”

“Marston! What do you mean?”

“They were pushed away, miss, down in a corner of her wardrobe, and I should not have found them but I was looking for something else. When I came into her room this morning, she wouldn’t let me draw back the curtains, and she had a long cut on her arm and a bruise on her forehead. Her basin was full of dirty water, and her hair, when I brushed it later on, had bits in it—bits of that stuff you see on trees, miss. What do they call it? Lichen, yes, that’s it. Now where has she been and what had she been doing to get herself in such a state? Can she go out alone at night upon these mountains? Why, she might be killed—fall down one of these precipices and nobody the wiser.”

“Do you mean to tell me that Camiola left the house in the night and got her clothes in this state?” said Miss Purdon, unable to believe her ears.

“She must have done, miss, unless somebody else uses her clothes. All these things were hanging in her wardrobe yesterday evening, brushed and tidy.”

Miss Purdon sat down, eyeing the forlorn garments helplessly. “How extraordinary!” she repeated vaguely. “Where could she go, and why?”

Marston hesitated. “If you please, miss, I am not one to repeat gossip; but Reed, he says that young Esler borrowed the big acetylene motor lamp off him yesterday and has not brought it back.”

“Young Esler!”

“Yes, miss. If Miss France does go out at night, I

think we may take it as certain that she does not go alone. Of course, miss, I know it is all right—she is a young lady with a dignity of her own; it is the danger I am thinking of, if she goes into places where she gets herself in such a state."

Miss Purdon went downstairs again in a bewildered condition of mind. Camiola, she supposed, was on the track of the Black Dragon. It was a curious, she now thought a significant, fact, that of late the girl had been silent on the subject. Bassett had not said anything to Mizpah of the suspicions of young Esler which Neville had imbibed from General Maldoval. She was not uneasy on that account, but the idea of the girl's secret nocturnal expeditions gave her a little shock. Every now and then she came upon some such evidence that she did not understand Camiola, and had never enjoyed her confidence.

She advised Marston to say nothing at all upon the subject, either to Miss France or to anybody else; but she herself determined to speak a word to Mr. Bassett as soon as she could get a convenient chance. She had noticed, at dinner, as Esler handed plates, that his fingers were bound up as though he had injured them. If he was really taking Camiola, at night, into dangerous places, it must somehow be stopped.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE MIDNIGHT BAPTISM

THE night of the Orenfels ball had come. The guests, numbering eighteen in all, had ridden up on mules during the afternoon, had tea, and then retired to dress for the evening.

Camiola, Mizpah, Irmgard and Betty were dressing under great difficulties, and with enormous hilarity, in the garret which they shared with Marston and Rahula for the night. Each had a cubicle, with a bed, a chair, a very small washstand with a truly Continental ewer and basin, a tiny looking-glass hung upon the wall above the washstand, a little table, and a strip of rug beside the bed.

That was all!

Nothing daunted, however, the girls rigged up a big toilet-table, with a mirror of useful size, in one of the six divisions, and took it in turns to have their hair done. Irmgard had assured them that, in spite of Otho's declaration to the contrary, very few of their visitors would desire the luxury of a bath in the morning, so they had brought their beloved tin tubs upstairs with them.

Otho, in capital health and wild spirits, had arrived that morning, and, with Neville, Bassett and Conrad, was sharing the next big garret. It was a glorious picnic for everybody, and the K.C. seemed to be enjoying it as much as anybody.

Miss Purdon and he had been carefully on the watch during the past week for any nocturnal wanderings on the part of Camiola. Nothing of the kind had taken place.

They also watched unremittingly for any signs of communication between her and Esler. Of this likewise they had seen nothing. The weather during a part of the week had been wet, but on every fine day they had gone on some expedition. Esler was not present on any of these occasions. Except for his daily attendance at the buffet of an evening, he might as well not have been in the house at all.

Camiola was absorbed in the preparations for her party, the polishing of the gallery floor, the consultations with Herr Neumann, who in person was to superintend the supper arrangements, the contrivance of extra sleeping accommodation, and so on.

She kept a brave front, but inwardly she suffered a great deal. It had not seemed possible to her that she could feel such keenness of pain, and for such an apparently inadequate reason.

She had allowed her feelings to escape from her control, and the effort to gather them in again was severely painful.

During the half-hour or so each day that Esler was in the same room with her, she neither looked at him nor spoke to him. At other times, if she saw him in the grounds, she walked the opposite way.

One day she was sitting, as she often did, in the oriel window of her own room, gazing out upon the sunny garden. She noticed, idly, that she had left her novel upon the marble seat on the tennis lawn, with her handkerchief between the pages as a marker. As she gazed she saw Esler coming up the hill with a basket of French beans on his arm. He was not looking well. The effect of his effort that night in the cave, his wonderful achievement in bringing her out of danger, had not yet worn off. There were purple shadows under his eyes, and his face looked thinner.

He passed slowly before the bench, and his eyes turned upon what lay there. He stood still a moment, looking; then, as if reluctantly, he went on.

His feet lagged, he hesitated, turned back, stood a moment with his back between her and the things she had left lying there. When he moved away the handkerchief had been abstracted from the book, and he walked off rapidly, with bent head, holding something to his lips.

Camiola felt furious. That night, when he set her soup-plate before her, she said, in the tone of abrupt command which she rarely if ever used to a servant:

“I left a handkerchief in the garden this afternoon upon the marble seat. Please fetch it.”

He finished carrying round the course, went out of the room, and in a minute or two reappeared with the handkerchief, neatly folded, upon a tray. She took it without comment, without daring to look at him; but she knew she had hurt him cruelly.

That was best. He was going away in a very few days now—each morning brought the time nearer. He was nothing to her, had refused her his confidence. It was best that they should not be on friendly terms—they who never could be friends.

On this night, in spite of the excitement of the moment, in spite of the fact that Otho was back, and that she meant—fully meant—to give him his chance some time during the evening, the thought of Esler was haunting her. She dwelt on the memory of his white, exhausted face, and the cold of his limbs when she had awakened, warm and safe, in the tunnel above the Gaura Draculuj. She thought of his faultless behaviour, all that night, and on every occasion when they had been alone together. He was a gentleman—an English gentleman; then what was he doing masquerading as a peasant at Orenfels? The insistence of the question was maddening. Yet she never

once for a moment dreamed of sharing her distress of mind with Irmgard, still less with Mizpah.

She looked upon the whole matter as a disgrace, a stain upon her girlhood, a lamentable deviation which must be smothered in her own heart forever. She had only to be strong for a couple of days more—to “hold out,” as he himself had said—and it would be all over. Her aberration would be a thing of the past, and she would in process of time forget it.

She was dressed and ready to meet her guests.

Supper was laid out in the dining-hall, the drawing-room was for couples sitting out, and a bridge table was also arranged there for the sake of one or two elders who were present. At one end of the gallery was a buffet for light refreshments, and the steaming coffee urns had just been carried in, when Camiola pushed open the secret door which led from the garrets and emerged into the long, clear space, the floor gleaming in the light of lamps and clusters of wax candles.

She was looking her very best. Since that evening in Truro Gardens, so few weeks ago, she had gained much. In spite of her having grumbled, while being dressed this evening, that living on the mountains spoilt you for wearing evening-dress, the effect of her gown was perfect. It was white and silver, and she wore La France roses in compliment to her own name.

One solitary disc of court plaster, very small, upon her left shoulder was all that was needed to cover her scars, her long white gloves concealing the cut upon her arm.

Conscious—as what girl is not conscious—of being admirably gowned and looking remarkably nice, she went up to Herr Neumann and congratulated him upon his arrangements. He replied with voluble compliments upon her beauty, and an emphatic wish that the Ildenthal might never lose so fair and generous a patroness. She smiled

and bowed in response to his gallantry with a better grace than had been possible on the last occasion when he launched forth. It was no longer out of the question that she might, after all——

Then the secret door burst open, and Conrad rushed out in all the glory of a dinner jacket and a real shirt front, Camiola having presented this attire for the occasion. He caught her about the waist and waltzed down the gallery with her, to the intense delight of all the waiters, looking on enraptured.

By degrees others assembled, the noise of chatter and laughing grew louder. Herr Neumann poured out coffee and insisted that the young mistress should drink it while she had a chance.

After this the band arrived, and was established, and presently dancing began.

“Ah!” whispered Otho to Betty, as he took her programme from her, “you are wearing blue! In my thought of you, you wear always blue—like the *Vergiss-mein-nicht*—what you call it in English?”

“We call it just the same,” murmured Betty, looking down. “Forget-me-not.”

“It was what I wanted to say when I was going away, only I had not the bravage—I mean the—the *muth*, you know!”

“The courage,” whispered Betty.

“Yes, the courage. I have been dreaming each night of lifting you in mine arms and bearing you down the river bank, and of your small hands upon my neck.”

“Oh,” said Betty, rising hurriedly, “don’t! I wish you would not! In England we do not talk like that; I mean, of course, unless——”

“Unless?”

She was much embarrassed. “I mean—a man would only talk like that to one girl—to the girl he——”

"The girl he—loved?" Otho's voice was magically soft.

"Yes," agreed Betty, crimson.

"Well, then, why tell me not?" demanded Otho delightedly. "I do only what they do in England, it seems."

"Oh," cried Betty, scared, "but you—you mustn't! You are—surely you are—going to marry Camiola."

"Do you think so?" he asked, gazing right into the girl's limpid eyes. He had the delight of seeing her lashes fall and the colour flood riotously over her fair face.

"Come," he said, "let us dance now. This waltz can speak to you of much I cannot say. I have so small English, but there is much the music shall plead for me."

His arm went round her, and they moved away together. Down the long gallery Betty was floating in a dream. Why, ah, why did people say such horrid things about foreigners? Was not Otho a foreigner? Was he not beyond compare, the most delightful, the most gallant gentleman she had ever known? Surely she need not consider Camiola, Miss France, with her great fortune, who would always have lovers at her feet! He, Otho, might actually have had the heiress, and preferred her, little Betty!

It did not, as a matter of fact, take Miss France long to discover that Otho had not come back to her as he went. As the evening progressed it became more and more evident that he was not at all anxious to snatch the chance which she had thought herself so eager to offer. He would dance with her, talk to her—he was excited, merry, charming—but he was not tender; he did not try to gaze into her eyes; he seemed, if anything, a little distract.

Camiola was soon able to discern the reason. Passing out upon the terrace, upon the arm of one of the von Imberts, she saw Otho and Betty sitting upon the marble bench. There was nothing unbecoming in their attitude,

but it seemed to her to indicate quite clearly that they were lovers. The thought made her pulses tingle. Was this the second man who might have had her and who said, "No, thank you"?

On the heels of that thought came other calmer, far more sensible reflections. To engage herself to-night, while still her heart was sore, while still that hateful madness held her, would be a counsel of despair.

It was not written in the Book of Fate that she should love and mate here at Orenfels, though never had she seen a place so suited to such things as love and marriage.

She laughed at herself. There was plenty of time before her. She need not feel so disturbed. She had always meant to wait until she was twenty-five before falling in love, and this unpleasant experience which she was undergoing was a fortunate thing in reality. It would put off her romance for some time to come.

In spite of all these wise and sober reflections, she was restless and miserable, so out of tune and unfit to play her part, that presently she felt a few minutes' respite imperatively necessary. Dismissing her partner on the plea of the duties of the hostess, she slipped downstairs as if to survey the supper room, to which in half an hour's time the company would resort. All was in order and looking charming, and she passed on through the main door of entrance into the flagged courtyard.

This was in solitude and darkness. No moon this week lit up the sky. The stars were the only light. The Milky Way lay like a wreath athwart the deep blue heavens, and every now and then a shooting star darted across like a falling diamond.

Camiola sat down upon the lowest of the semi-circular steps, and leaned her chin on her hand. She strove to get a firm grip upon herself. There was within her so strange a turmoil that she was frightened. She did not know

this undisciplined person. Surely it was not Camiola France, graduate of the University of Oxford? So she argued with herself, yet nothing seemed to have power to still the insistent fact which was before her mind all the time.

“He is going away to-morrow.”

Suddenly she started. As she sat she was facing the chapel windows across the quadrangle, and there was a light within.

Camiola stared. Yes, decidedly, there was a light—not a bright one, but she could see the picture upon the stained glass. It threw a little coloured shadow upon the paving-stones.

What could be going on at that hour in the chapel? She rose swiftly to her feet and crossed the court. Softly she laid a hand upon the latch of the chapel door, and it lifted, so noiselessly that it must have been carefully oiled. Pushing it open a very little way, she heard the sound of a voice—a priest’s voice—reciting. She slipped cautiously within and pushed the door to behind her. The entrance was on the north side of the chapel, near the west end. Exactly facing her as she stood was the font. Round it were grouped a little cluster of people in the light of one oil lamp hung upon the wall under an old, dimly gilded ikon.

The Popa stood by the font, holding an infant in his arms. Frau Esler was kneeling, with her back to Camiola, and Esler beside her. On the young man’s other side was a girl—an English girl, she was certain; she had too slim a back for it to belong to the Ildenthal. She wore white—a trailing white gown, and an artistic picture hat, white also. Under it her brown hair was visible. The fourth person, completing this curious group, was Forbes, her own butler, who knelt awkwardly, grasping the back

of a chair, and wore an air of feeling himself a fish out of water.

Camiola was in dense shadow where she stood. There was a dark-coloured portière across the chapel door on the inside. She drew it across her sparkling white dress, so that the priest—whom she knew to be very near-sighted—would not notice her if he looked that way. The others all had their backs turned to her.

She stood enthralled as the words of the service went on. Esler was evidently prompting Forbes with his replies. He was apparently anxious concerning the strength of the girl who knelt beside him. He leaned towards her with wistful solicitude, and once put out his hand and laid it across her waist behind as if to support her.

The service was soon over, and Forbes scrambled with alacrity to his feet.

“You’ll excuse me, sir, won’t you?” she heard him say to Esler. “I am all in a fuss lest I should be wanted any minute.”

The girl spoke in a clear, soft voice: “Yes, go, Forbes, and many thanks.” She held out a delicate hand.

Forbes took it, and stammered out: “I am sure I wish you joy, ma’am, both you and the gentleman and the dear little baby, too.”

Camiola had waited to this point, too devoured with flaming curiosity to reflect. Now, as the butler turned ponderously on his heel, she slipped like a shadow behind the portière and let herself out into the courtyard.

Her head was in such a whirl that she felt she could not be seen and spoken to just then, yet Forbes’s heavy tread was crossing the chapel floor, and he would be out upon her in a moment. She glanced along the side of the quadrangle which faced the main building, the side of which the keep formed the corner. In a flash she saw that the door of the keep stood ajar. She ran noiselessly

along the yard and slipped within the welcome doorway, just as Forbes came out of the chapel, and, crossing the yard with urgent haste, entered the castle hall.

She waited; the others were following close upon him; she must remain where she was until they had passed by. She glanced round her. A dimly burning and evil-smelling lamp was hung upon the wall of the rude guard-room wherein she stood. There were no signs of occupation, except for various bags and bundles, apparently containing the bandsmen's night apparel, which lay in a heap upon the floor. She pushed the door to and stood by it, listening intently, heard a faint sound of voices, footsteps pattered on the flags, somebody went to the little door in the big gateway, opened it with caution—she was so near that she could hear the rustle of departing petticoats—and then a step echoed close at hand; somebody was coming towards the door behind which she stood.

Panic assailed her. She felt like a trapped spy. She could not be caught thus, listening behind a door!

Her eye flashed round, she saw the foot of the corkscrew staircase in the corner. On noiseless feet she fled thither, and had just run lightly up one twist when she heard the door pushed open, then shut and barred.

Somebody walked across the floor below.

She could not possibly descend; the only thing to do was to go on to the room above, which she vaguely remembered as communicating with the next. She might go along and descend by a different stair. She pursued her way, and entered the upper room.

This, too, was lit, and she saw a camp bed, a table, a washstand. There was, however, no second door. On the table stood some objects which caught her attention almost to the exclusion of all other considerations.

On a table easel of well-carved oak was a picture frame, also of carved oak. In this frame was a sketch of her-

self which Irmgard, who drew very well, had made in the garden some days back and discarded as "not good enough."

Camiola, at the time, thought it good. Now, in its encasing oak, it looked even better than she had supposed it to be. On either side of it burned a tall candle, such as was used in the chapel. Before it was a vase containing La France roses.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE WILD SWANS

TAKEN in conjunction with the scene she had just witnessed below in the chapel, this seemed to Camiola little short of an outrage. Her eyes flashed with fury, she stretched her hand to snatch the picture from its shrine and fling it out of the window. Then a sound from below struck on her ear, and she realised her own plight. To get out of this place was what she had to do—to disappear unseen from what was evidently the emergency quarters of Esler for the night.

Creeping to the head of the stair, she listened. Nothing stirred below. She stood there, hardly daring to breathe, wondering what would happen next. After a long minute she heard the person below walk deliberately across the floor, open the door, go out, and shut it after him. The revulsion of feeling was acute. She was saved. She had only to wait a moment, and then make a dash. It was almost time for supper to be announced, and she must be present to take the arm of the old Graf von Orenfels, who was the sole member of the family, except Otho, to accept her invitation.

First, however, she would gratify her rage. She snatched the portrait, laid it on the ground, stamped upon it with the heel of her white suede slipper, stooped, dragged the paper from beneath the broken glass, and tore the sketch into tiny fragments. Then she gathered up her glittering draperies and stole softly down the stair.

Slowly she rounded the lowest curve of the corkscrew, and stood transfixed, facing Esler, who, with arms folded, was leaning against the barred door.

For one instant she felt inclined to act like a fishwife—to run to him and strike him on the face. In the next she was the great lady, and, drawing herself up to her full height, she said in German:

“I was looking round to see what accommodation they have made for the band. I think I have come in at the wrong door.”

He answered in English: “You are mistress here. I suppose it is your right to go in and out of all doors in this castle as you please.”

“Certainly,” she continued, with flashing eyes, still speaking German; “if I see a light in the chapel, I may enter to find out what can possibly be going on there in the midst of my party.”

His face altered, he looked conscious.

“As you said the other day, the private affairs of my servants are no concern of mine,” she went on. “I am no eavesdropper, but I do consider I have a right to overlook the carrying out of my orders.”

He said nothing.

“Let me out, please,” she commanded, coming a step into the room.

He gazed upon her with a curious expression. In that dim, rough place she looked like a vision. Pride and outraged dignity glowed in her like a flame. Her head, crowned with a small tiara of diamonds, was held proudly. He gazed as a man before being led to execution may gaze upon all he holds dearest.

“I have been hoping—trying for one word with you,” he pleaded chokingly, “for the last three days. I—I—shall not be here to vex you after to-morrow, and there is something rather important I wanted you to know.”

As she advanced to the door, with cold refusal in every line of her, he dropped his voice to a note that made her tremble inwardly.

“Ah, let me tell you!” he implored.

She laid her hand upon the bar. “Let this down at once.”

He raised his hand and laid it beside hers. “I went to the Gaura Draculuj on Saturday,” he almost whispered.

The change in her face, the involuntary look of attention she gave him encouraged him to go on.

“The water,” he continued, “has found a way somewhere down below, but it is escaping very slowly. On Saturday it was about three inches below the mouth of the chasm. It is still so hot that you can only just bear your hand in it. But—the point—the thing I want you to know is that the explosion threw up a lot of things.”

For an instant she forgot her raging animosity. “Things? Remains of *them*, do you mean?”

He assented. They were both speaking English now. “I want you to see them,” he added almost inaudibly.

“Where are they?”

“In the garden cave. I have made a list, and I should like to hand it over to you, before I go, so that you will have every detail of the affair in your own hands when you make your discovery public.”

In spite of her passion, she had a moment’s wonder at his generosity. He had laboured for many months upon this question. Had it not been for his work and his precautions, the truth could never have been ascertained. Here he laid it all in her hands—laid down every pretension, went away, and left her to reap the credit, the publicity of the discovery.

“How can I go there,” she faltered, “to-night? I shall not be in bed till dawn, and I am not sleeping in my own room.”

"To-morrow night," he muttered, so low that she could hardly hear him. He kept his eyes lowered, fixed upon their two hands resting upon the bar.

Camiola's head swam. Her first impulse was to say "No." She argued with herself, however.

Ostensibly this man was her servant, and he had proved himself a first-rate one. He was leaving her service, and they had, together, carried out a search which had proved highly successful. He felt, and she thought him right in feeling, that she ought to allow him to lay all the threads in her hands before his departure.

She told herself that throughout their intercourse he had not said one disrespectful word, had not done the slightest thing which could justify displeasure on her part.

She was eager to see the grim tokens which the Black Dragon had disgorged in his wrath. She hesitated, wavered; she could see how he waited for her decision; but he would not plead. He stood there, preserving the correct attitude as it were by main force.

"I will come," she whispered, with a little sound like a sob.

He drew a long breath, and began to lift the bar from before the door. "You are always good," he said, in a low voice, "and it cannot hurt you. You are young, rich, beautiful; you have everything you want; you will not regret." He checked himself, coughed, and added: "It will be a source of gratification to you all your life that you have cleared away the cloud of terror from the Ildenthal. Next year they will perhaps reopen the Kurhaus."

As he spoke the sound of the horn came to their ears, clearly, across the quadrangle. "I must run," cried Camiola, and as she spoke he set the door wide and she darted

out, flew swiftly across the flags, and up the steps into the hall.

Forbes, standing just within the door, most correct, looked relieved on seeing her. "You are waited for, miss," he told her anxiously. She hastened upstairs to the gallery, where all the couples were assembled. With a few words of laughing excuse, she took the old Graf's arm, and in a few minutes they were all descending the oak stairs, and filing into the hall, where the supper table was spread in the form of a big T, Camiola being seated at the crossing point.

The band, leaving the dancing hall, filed into the musicians' gallery, and accompanied the meal with beautifully subdued music.

"It is like the olden days come to life once more!" cried the old Graf, looking with eager eyes upon Otho.

Otho avoided the avuncular glance. Betty was his partner, and he was sitting by her. Camiola's glance wandered from this couple to another. Neville and Irmgard were also together, and Irmgard's face was alight with happiness.

The mistress of the castle felt old and cold.

She was, however, determined that her own lack of spirits should not affect her guests. She roused herself to be exceptionally merry, and the banquet passed off most successfully. Everybody seemed pleased. With Irmgard's help she had been able to settle all the minutiae of precedence. Everybody had his or her proper place at table, and their national etiquette had been consulted wherever possible.

From all her guests she had the most gratifying attention, and she could congratulate herself upon a popularity quite surprising for one of her race. Yet, ah, how she ached for something more than this!

As the end of the programme approached Conrad ran up to her.

"Miola, darling, you are going to have the usual thing for the two last dances?" he pleaded.

She looked puzzled. "The usual thing? What is that?"

"Having in all the servants and we dance with them?"

"Why, that is a fine idea; but I knew nothing of it! The servants won't be expecting it; they won't be ready or prepared."

"Won't they just! I told them it was all right! I mean, I said I knew it would be all right, because you wanted it all to be done in proper Illdenthal style. So they are waiting, all of a twitter, and the bandsmen know the thing to play to summon them all in!"

"Conrad, this is delightful!" cried Camiola. "But why have you kept it dark until now? Do the others know?"

"Not the English, I expect, except, perhaps, Uncle Arnold; he seems to know most things about us!"

Miss France flew down the room and poured out the idea to Mizpah and Betty, who agreed that it was most entertaining.

The signal was duly given to the band, and they at once struck up a curious kind of air, like the "Ranz des Vaches."

Upon the sound the doors at the lower end of the gallery opened, and Forbes entered with Frau Esler, resplendent in the native costume, upon his arm. Esler followed, also in his native dress, with Marston. Behind them the house servants, two and two, then the hired waiters and other retainers. Each couple walked up to Camiola, curtseyed, and passed on. It was like a scene in a play, and the English found it very delightful. Then the band struck up a national dance air, and Conrad and the other gentlemen of the house-party hastened to find partners.

This was evidently not a matter of choice, precedence being strictly observed. Forbes, with shamefaced aspect, admitted that he was no dancer, and that Miss Purdon had promised to sit out with him; but Frau Esler, with Arnold Bassett, skimmed along like a bird.

Etiquette demanded that Camiola should dance with Esler.

As he came up to beg the favour of her hand, she was half tempted to believe that the whole episode of the chapel, the existence of his wife and child, her own interview with him, were alike dreams, the figment of her imagination.

They were dancing together. In very few steps she knew that this was a partner such as she had not had during the whole evening. She felt as though floating out from real life into the realms of fancy. They did not speak, but she knew that something in him responded to every breath she drew. Their very pulses seemed to beat in unison or harmony.

On and on they went. Each knew that only the ceasing of the music could make them pause. As long as this could last, it must last. The pleasure was so intense it might almost have been described as rapture.

When at last the band drew out its final, lingering chords, they stood together before one of the widely opened windows looking on the terrace. Camiola leaned upon the sill, watching the twinkling lights of the town puncturing the velvet darkness beneath.

"The first night that I passed in Ildestadt," she said dreamily, "I looked out of my window at the Blaue Vögel, and saw a light burn here in the tower. Why, that must have been in the room at the end of the passage up there above—your wife's room."

He made no reply at all. He leaned against the case-

ment with folded arms and lowered eyes. His expression did not change.

Camiola did not speak again, and after a long pause he asked a question:

“Did you ever read Hans Andersen’s story of the Wild Swans?”

“I think so—yes. Why?”

“Do you remember the princess who could not deliver her brothers unless she kept a complete silence?”

“Yes.”

“It’s rather a pathetic story, I think, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“When you are thinking extra bad things of me, will you remember it?” he asked, raising his eyes to her face.

She flashed a look at him, but dared not prolong it. At the moment Bassett came up to them.

“Now, Esler,” said he good-humouredly, “coach me on this matter. With whom must I dance next?”

He spoke German, of course, and Esler, with a bow to his late partner, went off with him at once.

Camiola was left for one long, surprising moment by herself. She no longer felt old and cold. In her blood was the fire of the dance, the pulsating excitement of feet that moved in concert—and the thought of the princess in the story, weaving coats of nettles, hurting her hands, bruising her delicate fingers, silent in face of calumny, all for the sake of rescuing those she loved.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SECRET INTERVIEW

CAMIOLA turned from her farewells, from seeing off the last of her guests, stepped back through the little door in the big gate, and crossed the sunny courtyard with her arm round Conrad's neck. As they entered the dining-hall, Marston met them, with a face so white that Camiola was frightened.

"If you please, miss, I wish to speak to you at once," she gasped, in a voice which shook either with rage or terror, her mistress was not clear which.

"Come, then, up into the drawing-room," said Camiola, wondering what could possibly be the matter.

The drawing-room was vacant, the party being most of them strolling outside the front entrance, saying their good-byes, and enjoying the sunshine.

"Now, Marston, my dear soul, out with it. What *is* the matter?"

"The matter is, miss, that I have seen a ghost."

Camiola started, then laughed. "Why, Marston, the wonder to me seems not that somebody has at last seen a ghost, but that nobody has seen one before. But tell me about it."

Marston was in a state of such nervous tension that the very suggestion of flippancy was too much for. She burst into tears, and Camiola, seeing how completely in earnest she was, became serious at once, and soon coaxed her into relating the story.

"You see, miss, I was waiting to get into my room this

morning—as you know one of the young gentlemen had it last night. The reason was that I had got all your diamonds in a hand-bag, and though the people hereabouts seem very honest, still there were a good many strange waiters and such up at the castle last night, and one can't be too careful. I wanted to slip into my own room the moment it was left vacant and lock the bag up in the wall cupboard there.

"We had breakfast late in the hall this morning, not until most of the ladies and gentlemen were down, and I stole up, before our breakfast was over, leaving everybody else at table, and hastened to my room. As you know, miss, my door is just facing yours, and as I went into my room I thought I heard somebody moving in yours. That surprised me, because everybody was down-stairs so far as I knew. Certainly none of the housemaids could be there. So I pushed the door of my room almost shut, and peeped out.

"I heard a soft rustling noise, and three people were coming along the passage from the door that opens on the gallery. They were coming towards me, and I saw them all three quite distinctly. One was a woman in the costume these folks wear hereabouts. She carried a little infant in her arms. The other was a lady of the most unearthly beauty." Marston paused, and her eyes rolled with the combined effect of memory and imagination. "She wore a white dress, and a hat such as you see in old pictures, miss! I noticed that she glided more than walked. Her eyes were fixed in a kind of terror, and as the sunlight fell across the gallery I could see that her draperies was, as you may say, kind of transparent. The three went straight into your room for all the world as if it belonged to them. I was so taken aback that for a long time, or what seemed a long time, I could not move. But as soon as I had collected my thoughts a little, I stepped

boldly out into the passage and followed them. I knew they was strangers and had no right in the house, and I knew it was my duty to ask their business. One does not realise, miss, all in a minute that you have seen something that is not of this earth. Well, miss, I walked in as bold as you please, and nobody was there."

"Nobody was there?"

"No, miss. Your room was empty. Of course, thinks I, they have gone through into Miss Purdon's room; and then, all of a sudden, I remembered."

"You remembered what?"

"I remembered that when we were turning out of our rooms for the visitors, Miss Purdon locked the door between your room and hers and gave the key to me. *It was in my pocket at the moment.* Of course, I tried the door to make sure. It was locked right enough, and if anybody had locked and unlocked it I must have heard them, for it is a noisy affair. I looked under the bed and behind the window curtains. Of course, there was nothing, and then I knew I had seen a ghost."

This piece of news vexed Camiola. She did not at all wish Marston to go about saying that the house was haunted, but, on the other hand, she was most unwilling to reveal the secret of the way out of her room. Moreover, if she did explain, if she did say that the individuals seen were friends of Frau Esler and had gone out by the secret way to the garden, then what reason for such secrecy could she give? Why should not Frau Esler's niece go out by the ordinary methods of exit?

She tried the cowardly expedient of persuading Marston that her senses had deceived her—that some trick of sunlight and shadow had produced the unlikely little group of fugitives. Marston was naturally very indignant. She said she had not been five years with Miss France to have her word disbelieved, and that she should

go to Miss Purdon and lay the matter before her. In broad daylight, at breakfast time, how could she possibly have imagined two women and a baby?

Camiola, driven to bay, said she had reason to believe that there was a baby in the house—some relation of Frau Esler's—she had not thought it her business. This made it so much more unlikely that the persons in question could disappear from view that Marston grew suddenly suspicious. Something, she could hardly tell what, made her apprehensive. Camiola was concealing something, she felt sure. With some abruptness she suddenly concluded the interview, saying she supposed she must have been dreaming, and went off, as Camiola well knew, to find Miss Purdon.

Miss France felt annoyed. Esler was reckless. No doubt it was a stroke of genius to have his child baptised at a moment when the attention of everybody in the house was distracted from his proceedings. No doubt the chances of the women's reaching the secret door unseen while the whole household was at breakfast was a very good one—but with so many people about such risks could not be run with safety. In both cases the persons who so mysteriously seemed to desire to remain hidden had been seen.

She was not left very long to consider the matter, for Irmgard was heard calling to her; and, upon Camiola's replying, burst eagerly in to tell her of her engagement to Neville. The girl was in such a state of bliss, mingled with anxiety as to what her father might say, that Camiola's whole attention was engrossed.

She did not think that Irmgard would receive a very effusive welcome from the Thurlow family, and determined that she herself must do all she could to atone for their possible shortcomings. To have Irmgard married to a relation of her own was a delightful thing. She be-

gan to suppose that there must be qualities in Neville which nobody, so far, had discovered.

The news could not be made public until Neville had received an answer to the letter he was at this moment composing to the General.

Camiola gave all the love and sympathy which could possibly be demanded of her; and this interview was only brought to an end by the appearance of Otho and Conrad, with demands that the promised expedition to the Gaura Draculuj should be deferred no longer, but should take place upon the morrow.

Camiola had been prepared for this request, and, in face of what Esler had told her, was ready with her answer. He had intimated that the cave might now be entered in safety, and Camiola's brain held glittering pictures of their amazement when she should relate, with much detail and circumstance, the adventures she had been through in that awe-inspiring spot.

Her ambitions were, however, still deeply tinged with the horror she had experienced upon first realising the ghastly character of the catastrophe which had overtaken the unfortunates who perished there. It seemed to her that at present she could not face the idea of visiting the place without Esler's supporting presence. Could she persuade him to stay just twelve hours longer? She thought that this might be possible.

"I think," she ventured cautiously, "that we might go to-morrow."

"Erwald said we could not go," observed Conrad in an injured tone. "He told me you had left it too late, because Esler is going away, and he declares he won't take us without him. He says we are too large a party for one guide."

"That is true," said Camiola, "we shall have to arrange

for more guides, and the men are shy of the Gaura Draculuj."

"Is it really true that Esler is leaving?" cried Conrad dolefully. "Why didn't we go before he left?"

"That was Captain von Courland's fault," replied Camiola mischievously. "He made us promise not to go without him."

"It's just the one place I want to see most," persisted Conrad, "and if you thought it likely that it would not come off, I think you might have warned us, 'Miola. Did you know Esler was leaving?"

"Yes, I knew," she admitted, feeling her cheeks grow warm. "But I was thinking about the party, you know. I had forgotten the Gaura Draculuj for the time. Never mind, Con, if it can anyhow be arranged you shall go, I promise you, old man."

Nothing at all was to be seen of Esler throughout that day, though Conrad went about hunting for him. Frau Esler said he had been obliged to go down to Ildestadt to superintend the departure of the band, but Camiola guessed that it was another departure which had occupied him. She felt a most unreasonable satisfaction in the thought that his wife had left the house. Why she had gone before him she could not guess, but she felt certain that Marston had witnessed her secret departure. The two rooms upstairs would perhaps now be left unlocked. She felt as inquisitive as Bluebeard's wife in her desire to go and look into them. They had gone, and to-morrow Esler would follow them. The whole of this tiresome episode would be over. She would be glad—glad!

The story of the Wild Swans recurred to her mind many times. When would the coats of nettles be finished?

It was with a distracted attention and a heavy heart that she went about the business of entertaining her guests. Everybody was tired and "after-the-partyish," and the day

was not very satisfactory. Otho and Betty went strolling in the woods and got lost, returning late, with embarrassed apologies; and the other pair of lovers were so openly absorbed in one another that, as Conrad remarked, "a stuffed Teddy-bear could have guessed their secret."

Mizpah felt sorry for Camiola. It had dawned upon her that, whatever might be Miss France's intentions, Otho's had changed completely. The danger of seeing the heiress betrothed to an obscure and needy foreign noble was apparently over.

To the hostess's satisfaction, everybody was ready for bed very early. Even Conrad wondered whether a party was really worth the "beastly slackness" you felt next day. Camiola was so guiltily sensible of her own unwisdom in having promised to meet Esler that night, that she could think of nothing else. Whatever happened, she meant, however, to keep her appointment.

Marston undressed her in a very unpleasant frame of mind. Camiola bore it meekly. Miss Purdon had listened to what the maid had to say with a very doubtful mind. She could not quite believe in the ghost ladies, and she was puzzled. But both Marston and she were fully determined to keep a watch that night.

Left to herself, and having allowed an interval for people to go to sleep, Camiola arose. For the sake of speed, she put on a tea-gown, and wrapped herself in a cloak.

When she descended the spiral, by the light of her torch, she saw Esler, seated on the rough table, with a good lamp burning.

As he rose and stood awaiting her, she saw that he was wearing the ordinary clothes of an English gentleman—a summer lounge suit. This gave her a little shock of surprise, which was apparently partly shared by the young man, who had always hitherto seen her, under these circumstances, in her mountaineering dress.

"This is to be a strictly business interview," said Camiola coldly.

"On my part, it is to be a confession," he replied quietly. "I have found out that I am not strong enough to leave you finally without telling you the truth. Will you give me leave to do it?"

He had placed a stool for her—there were no chairs—and he stood before her, awaiting her permission. The colour came to her face, for she had not expected this. After a short hesitation: "I have no wish to force your confidence," she said uncomfortably. "You have been silent so long—and now you are going—had you not better keep silent still?"

"Yes, I had better, but I can't," he answered bluntly. "Confession is the only sort of relief I may hope for. In all probability I shall never see you again. Let me have at least the comfort of knowing that you do not think worse of me than the facts warrant."

She flushed suddenly. "Are the coats of nettles finished?" she cried eagerly.

"All but one sleeve," he answered, with a fleeting smile. Then he hurried on impetuously:

"You are the very soul of honour—like your namesake in the old play—Camiola, the Lady of Honour! You have said nothing to anybody of all the things you have found out. I know that you will say nothing of what I tell you unless you deem it right and wise. I can trust you—as once you said you trusted me—God bless you! Now listen. My mother was Roumanian. She married an Englishman, and they were very poor. They struggled, however, to give a good education to me and my only sister. I went into the navy. My father died when I was a boy, my mother ten years later. My sister, Clare, became a resident governess. She was very pretty—far too pretty for such a life. An elderly man visited at the

house where she taught. He fell in love with her, and she, poor child, was tempted by the desire of a home, and happiness—of being loved, of having some place to which I could come, some means of helping me. Well! I was away in the Mediterranean when it happened. I never saw the man, or I should have tried to stop her. He was not a good man, and he was not even kind to her. Having married her, an orphan, without means, without friends, he thought he had got her into his power, and could bully her as he pleased.

“She bore it for a time, but he grew rapidly worse. At last I came home, and if you will believe me, we had to meet clandestinely, he would not have me to his house. Of course, I found out what a life she led. Then she told me all. She had just discovered that she was to have a child, and she was in terror lest his cruelty, the agonising tension of nerves at which she lived, might injure her baby. She wanted to get away, at least for a time—at least until the child was born. I made a plan. I thought of Frau Esler. She was my mother’s foster-sister. Once, when we were children, and my mother was in poor health, my father sent us here, and we were twelve months with the Eslers, nobody knowing who we were. Later—at the time of my father’s death—my mother came here with us both. I had three months’ furlough, and we spent it here. It was then that I began to investigate the mystery of the Gaura Draculuj. Frau Esler loves Clare, and I felt that, if I could get her here, she would be safe; so we escaped together, and her husband did not, I think, know that I had anything to do with her flight.

“We got here in December, just before the heavy snow fell; and all went well, until——”

He paused there. Suddenly Camiola raised her brimming eyes. She said only two words—“Your sister?”

He nodded silently.

"I had to save her," he said, almost roughly. "I suppose I have been a fool. I think so now. I have thrown up my career—left myself without even the poor prospects my profession afforded. But, at least, I have saved Clare and the child."

He was sitting on the wheelbarrow, and his hands and arms rested on the table. She leaned forward, grasping his hands in hers, holding them tight.

"Don't!" said Esler imploringly. "This is a strictly business interview. I was not making a bid for your sympathy—only just telling you the truth."

"It has been hard for you," she said tremulously.

"Hard?" He laughed, sprang to his feet, almost flung off the caressing touch of her hands. "It's over now," he said, "or very nearly. Come, I had better show you the things I have found in the cave."

Camiola rose to her feet. Her head was swimming. She tried to face the moment calmly. Should she allow this man to bid her adieu and go away, out of her life forever? Or should she bid him stay? Love and pride struggled in her. It seemed as though he settled the question for her, so business-like was his attitude and manner as he brought forward a tray, with objects upon it, covered with a cloth.

"Hush!" whispered Camiola suddenly. "Did you hear something?"

Both listened, and both heard sounds. "I believe I left the door open in my room," she gasped. "Somebody is coming down." A light now became visible, rounding the corner of the stair. A moment later, Miss Purdon, in her dressing-gown with a bedroom candle, appeared in the cave.

"Is that you? How you startled me!" said Camiola briskly. "I am making an inventory of Esler's scientific discoveries. He is going away to-morrow, you know."

CHAPTER XXIX

GRAVE SUSPICIONS

ARNOLD BASSETT had dressed in a hurry, and nearly an hour before his usual time. These circumstances combined to flurry him, even without the mysterious and urgent message sent to him by Miss Purdon, that he should come down and interview her in the garden.

When he appeared, he found the lady pacing to and fro upon the flagged terrace with haggard face.

They sat down together in the covered pergola where often tea was served, and he asked, with real anxiety, what was the matter.

“It is Camiola,” faltered the poor lady, with every symptom of disorder. “I have been blind, indeed. I am in a state of mind which I can hardly describe to you. She seems to have been carrying on a course of deceit and duplicity ever since we came to this detestable spot—and I have known nothing of it. And the awful part of it is, that I can do nothing. If I remonstrate with her, what is there to prevent her from dismissing me, and hiring a companion who will be more complaisant?”

She ceased from sheer lack of breath, and Bassett, in horror, begged for a detailed account of what Camiola had been doing.

“It is some time ago now—I really forget exactly how long—that Marston showed me a suit of Camiola’s clothes—mountain clothes—in a most frightful state. They had apparently been wet through, and dragged through the mire; they were stuffed away, as if to hide them, in a

corner of her wardrobe, and Marston only found them accidentally. She told me she was certain that Camiola went out—at night—in secret, for the clothes had been tidy and brushed and put away the previous evening. . . . Well, you know Marston sleeps just across the passage, and she is a light sleeper. So am I. We determined to be on the watch, and to make sure if the girl left her room during the night. During several nights not a sound did we hear, and I was beginning to think it was all nonsense, when Marston had a curious experience.” She then related Marston’s ghost story—how she had seen three people enter Camiola’s room who did not emerge again. “This put an idea into Marston’s head. She became certain that the girl had a way of leaving her room without coming out into the passage at all. She determined to find out, so she invented an errand—an excuse to go into her mistress’s room, late last night. She knocked at the door about half-past twelve. There was no answer. She went in, and Camiola was not there. Looking round in perplexity, she suddenly saw that a panel in the wall was open. That was enough. She called me. I took a candle, saw that stairs led down from the secret door, descended them, and found——”

“Yes—yes—you found ?”

“I found Camiola sitting in a cave—an underground cave—in the company of—of the young gardener—Esler.”

“Good Heavens!” Bassett sprang to his feet, and in his turn began to pace the terrace. “Thurlow and I have been to blame—greatly to blame,” he said, at last, in tones of bitter self-reproach. “General Maldovan gave Thurlow a hint, when he first came here, that that fellow was not to be trusted. We thought it best to say nothing to Camiola, but I see now that there was one person we ought to have told, and that was yourself!”

“Oh, Mr. Bassett, indeed I think you ought! What is

to be done? She told me some story of their having made scientific discoveries together. She said she was going to tell you all about it this morning. The young man, it appears, is leaving to-day. I cut her very short, saying that I thought she could not know how late it was, and she came up to bed quite meekly. I had a bit of a scene with her upstairs. She would tell me nothing. All I could obtain was a promise that she would not go down again to the cave that night. The last thing she said to him was: 'Please do not leave until I have seen you again,' and he said he would not. I should tell you that he was wearing the kind of suit that you might wear yourself. He was not dressed as he usually is."

"Was his manner disrespectful?"

"Oh, dear, no, quite deferential."

"Well," said Bassett, "the first thing we must do after breakfast is to warn Camiola, and I am sorry we did not do it sooner. She is a good girl on the whole, and I expect she has been nothing worse than indiscreet. It is a pity, but if the fellow is going, and nobody but you and myself know of her secret meetings, let us hope there may be no great harm done. As to you, Miss Purdon, you must be altogether acquitted of blame. Any that there may be lies between Neville and myself."

Miss Purdon, much consoled by this speech, was going on to say more, when out from the house door, which opened upon the terrace, came Neville Thurlow, with a letter in his hand, and upon his face an expression of most unusual excitement.

"Bassett, here is an astonishing thing," said he. "Do you remember that I am on the hunt for the missing wife of a client of mine named Cooper? Well, this morning I went down the hill to meet the Briefträger, as I wanted him to take down some telegrams with him to Ildestadt for dispatch. He handed me the morning batch of letters,

and I brought them up in my hand. Look here!" He held out a letter, which was addressed to Mrs. Cooper, at a street in Hermannstadt, the name and address being both scratched out and the envelope readdressed to Frau Esler, at Schloss Orenfels.

The three looked at one another. Bassett felt a surge of rage rise up beneath his peaceable British waistcoat. In the light of what he had just heard, the stories of the concealed woman at Orenfels took on a sharp significance. And this was the young man with whom his noble, his darling Camiola was associating at night in secret.

"Good Heavens, Thurlow, this is monstrous!" he burst out. "We have behaved like fools, like idiots! We ought to have bundled out that chap the moment we heard these rumours."

They sat down together, and talked the thing out. Camiola must, of course, know all. There seemed, however, very little else that they could do, except telegraph for Mr. Cooper to come over and confront the man who had stolen his young wife from him.

When the party assembled for breakfast, Camiola looked so radiant, so dignified, so splendid, as Bassett said to himself, that it was hard to imagine her having been silly enough to indulge in a foolish flirtation with a peasant.

So fearless was her manner, so direct her glance, so spontaneous her laughter, that the K.C. felt uncomfortable at the bare idea of having to confess to her that her young protégé was a double-dealer, a fraud.

It was quite humbly that he asked her if she would come upstairs to the drawing-room and talk to himself, Neville, and Miss Purdon.

She assented readily and simply; and went before them up the oak stair with springing step and care-free aspect.

"Now," said she. "Shall I guess what you want to

say to me? Mispah surprised my secret last night, and so I have not quite such a chance as I hoped for to make a staggering revelation to you all. However, I must do my best. You all three know that I love adventure, don't you? Well, I have to confess that, during my stay here I have been having a glorious adventure, and the results are now ready to be communicated, not to you three only, but to the whole party, especially Captain von Courland."

Bassett hesitated. It seemed to him then quite a pity not to leave the girl in her innocence. Obviously she had no idea of Esler's shady character. She was full of a wholly different subject.

He looked uncomfortably at Neville, but Neville saw the matter from his own standpoint. He had made a discovery, and he wanted his client to have the whole benefit of it.

"Camiola," he said, "we are very ready to hear of your adventure, but we wish, for your own sake, that you had not kept it secret—for a reason which perhaps we ought to have communicated to you."

"Indeed? What was that?"

"General Maldovan told me," said Neville rather nervously, "some time ago, that young Esler had a bad name in Ildestadt; in short, that he was suspected of keeping a—a companion—a lady—up here at the Schloss."

"Well, if Esler *is* married, it is hardly our business, is it?" asked Camiola, with a little laugh. "I have been using him as a guide, and he is an excellent one. I do not consider his domestic affairs to be my concern."

Neville coloured. "I am afraid that, strange as you may think it, your servant's love affairs are my concern," he said obstinately. "Do you remember my mentioning to you a client of mine, called Cooper, who was looking for his missing wife?"

"Why, yes!" cried Camiola, with a start of memory,

"that had slipped from my mind; but, of course, I do."

Neville rose, and handed her the letter he had intercepted that morning. She held the envelope in her hand, gazing upon it.

"You think, I gather," said she quietly, "that the Eslers are protecting this poor lady, and that this is the root of the stories about the young man which are being circulated in the town?"

Neville was silent. He glanced at Bassett as though to say it was his turn. Camiola's innocence was baffling.

"Well, that may be so, of course," remarked Bassett reflectively.

"You can hardly be suggesting," said Camiola with a curl of her lip, "that Mrs. Cooper, whom I take to be an English lady, of some social position, would run away with an Ildenthaler peasant lad, who speaks no English."

"I hardly know what to think," said Neville stiffly.

"But you consider it your duty to your client to take advantage of this letter which you have accidentally seen, and to hand the poor thing over to her tyrant?"

"Poor thing, and tyrant!" said Bassett sharply. "Is that the way the relations between a runaway wife and her husband strike you, Camiola?"

"Why, I heard Neville describe his client as a most disagreeable person, a man any wife would run from if she could," was the reply. "I am reminded somehow of Pompilia, in 'The Ring and the Book.' Perhaps Esler has played the part of Caponsacchi. We know what half Rome said about that."

Neville felt distinctly annoyed. He had no answer ready.

"This seems to you very important, does it?" asked Camiola. "Because if you think it might wait a few hours, I do want to tell you all about my discovery. I thought you would all be so excited to hear that I have

actually seen the Black Dragon, and found out what became of the tourists, and very nearly lost my life in the process, only Esler saved me. This is sober fact that I am telling you. He saved my life at the risk of his own, by a feat of daring which, when you see that place, you will say was almost superhuman. I own that, in view of what I owe him, I am inclined to shield him to the best of my power. He is a brave man, and I am very loath to believe that he can be base."

"It is, of course, possible," said Mizpah tentatively, looking at Neville, "that this Mrs. Cooper may be a kind of boarder? This place is temptingly remote. The Eslers may have been persuaded to increase their income by taking in a guest, unknown to the Graf von Orenfels. This would naturally give rise to the gossip in the town."

Neville had to own that this was probable.

"Will you wait a few hours, Nev., before taking any action?" suggested Camiola. "You see, I promised Conrad and Captain von Courland, that they should go to the Dragon's Chasm to-day. Esler is waiting to go with us before his own departure. When you have seen and heard all that he and I have to tell you, you can question him. I am sure he will answer honestly."

The three looked at one another. They all felt that Camiola's view of the question was the sensible, the probable one. Neville in the new softness of heart which his own happy love-affair had engendered in him, was by no means anxious to hand over an unhappy wife to such a man as Cooper. In an interchange of glances, it could be seen that the other three were willing to wait awhile; and Camiola jumped up with glee, clapping her hands.

"Oh, you are all so kind and so nice!" She actually hugged Uncle Arnold. "Now I will go and give orders. We will start off in half an hour from now, all the good old party, Esler and Erwald included. Assemble in my

room in half an hour's time, and you will see what you will see!"

She flew out into the corridor, calling to Conrad and Otho. Her happy voice rang through the old house in girlish gaiety.

"Tut, tut," said Bassett, wiping his gold-rimmed pince-nez. "This is all a mare's nest. The girl is right. Let us forget it for a time, and join in her grand discovery."

CHAPTER XXX

THE DRAGON-SLAYER

IN Camiola's room they all assembled, even Mizpah, with alpenstock and mountaineering attire. With dramatic solemnity Camiola flung open the secret door, and they all filed down the winding stair, amid squeaks of utter joy from Conrad. In the gardening cave stood Esler and Erwald, with various lanterns, including the new acetylene lamp. Reed had been also invited to be of the party, that he might learn the fate which had overtaken his old one! Esler, needless to say, was once more clad in his accustomed habit as a guide.

It was in the greatest trepidation that Mizpah suffered herself to be escorted by the K.C. down the tunnel. When they came out of the home cave, above the Trollsbrücke, they were afraid she would have to turn back, so dizzy did the ravine and the unprotected path make her feel.

However, she was coaxed along, and in due course they all found themselves at the mouth of the outer cave, where they waited, while the two guides and Reed went in to make sure that the water was down and that it was safe to bring in the party.

At last all was announced to be ready, and they entered. At the mouth of the low passage leading to the Gaura Draculuj, Mizpah again required much reassuring, but upon the other girls all going through without difficulty, she plucked up heart, and at last entered the fatal spot.

It was brilliantly lit to-day, and on one side the guides had rigged up a kind of table, with boards and trestles,

upon which lay exposed the relics of the mountain tragedy.

Three or four skulls, none of them perfect; the remains of a camera; an object which had once been a pocket flask; a battered silver cigar case; the ribs of two umbrellas; and a whole collection of smaller bones, bits of metal, and matted fibrous remains of fabric.

There they lay; all that the Black Dragon had spued from his terrible maw in his late outburst.

Then, as they all stood round, glancing at the black, dripping walls, at the chasm, almost full of water, upon whose surface a light smoke still curled, Camiola placed herself in the centre, and described the whole adventure of herself and Esler.

Bassett could hardly believe it. He took the rope, ascended to the first ledge, thence with the help of the upper rope—Esler had replaced both—to the little shelf upon which the motor lamp had been left. There was now a third rope, properly secured to the tooth of rock upon which Esler had fastened his frail life-line on that awful night.

“You mean to tell me that you went up this with Miss France on your back?” he demanded of the young man, in stupefaction.

“Miss France gave some help,” said Esler meekly. “She clung wherever there was any kind of hold; and I am a sailor, you must remember. But I don’t know how I did it. I don’t think I could do it again.”

“It was so strange, so wild, somehow,” said Camiola, “to lie in my own bed that morning and have Marston come in and tell me the time, and to think how nearly, how very nearly, she had entered to find my bed empty, and in all probability not even my body would have been found! Oh, you can’t think what it felt like! All that day I was nearly bursting into tears whenever I remembered it; and next night I awoke, shuddering, time after

time, with that black gulf underneath me. I wonder I wasn't ill."

Conrad was not content until the actual apparition of the Black Dragon had been many times detailed. "How simply fearful!" he kept on remarking, with ever increasing relish. "I can imagine how the column of black water looked like a huge neck! And that was what poor old Hoffman saw and it sent him off his head!"

"I don't wonder. It nearly sent me off mine," replied Camiola. "I sat like an idiot and should have been killed in a few minutes if Esler had not run—if he had not seen, that very instant, that we must go up higher. Had he waited, even a minute or two, we should both have been boiled—think of it, Conrad, *boiled alive!*"

"Oh, don't let them stay here, it may still be dangerous," pleaded poor Mizpah. "And this smell is so horrible, like vaults! And the heat—take me out into God's blessed daylight!"

She was escorted forth, but had to wait a long time before the curiosity of the others was satisfied, and they joined her.

There ensued a great setting out of lunch, and eating and drinking and discussing the great discovery. When the meal was nearly over Conrad suddenly cried out that he thought everybody should drink Esler's health. This was enthusiastically received, and they all sprang to their feet, Neville and Bassett being, as Camiola noted, as keen as anybody. They gave tremendous "Hochs," and the young guide stood bareheaded in the sunshine receiving the ovation with his usual modesty and quiet.

"Now you must make a speech, Esler!" cried Conrad, when the cheering had died down.

"I will not make a speech," said Esler, "but I will ask you all to drink to the health of the Fräulein France. I thank you humbly that you have not given me the blame

I justly deserve for having led her into danger. That I was able to keep her safe will always be to me the best thing in my life. May God keep her—always, everywhere."

He held up his glass, and Bassett, raising his own in the sunshine, repeated the toast in English: "Camiola! May God keep her—always, everywhere!"

They stood round her smiling, cheering enthusiastical-
ly; and suddenly she could not see for the mist of tears. She glanced up, smiled, wavered, then said: "I can't thank you! I want to cry," and turned her face against Irmgard's shoulder.

Esler's eyes were fixed upon Otho, but Otho seemed to be occupied with something which was wrong with Betty's shoe-string.

After lunch, when they had smoked and talked, and were about to return home, Camiola went up to Esler and said:

"Before you go, Mr. Thurlow wants to speak to you. He intercepted a letter this morning, and would like to know if you can tell him anything about it."

She spoke in German, quite formally; and with his usual manner of the respectful servant he rose and followed her to where Neville and Bassett were smoking, a little apart from the rest.

"Neville," she said, "will you please show Esler the letter you found this morning?"

Neville coloured a little awkwardly, but he produced the letter and gave it to the young man, explaining carefully, with Camiola's help as translator, his reasons for retaining it for a few hours.

Esler listened, with a half-smile upon his face, and when Neville had finished he looked at Camiola with an apologetic air of mischief.

“Mr. Thurlow,” he said in English, “I am glad to tell you that you have found this letter nearly thirty-six hours too late. Mrs. Cooper is my sister. She left this place yesterday morning, about half-past nine o’clock, and is now out of reach. For this reason I am glad to be able to drop the rôle I have been forced to play during the past weeks, and to tell you that, if you are, as I understand, Mr. Cooper’s accredited representative, I, acting for my sister, am quite ready to explain to you the terms upon which she is willing to return to her husband.”

Neville started when the young man began to speak. He recovered himself quickly, however, and listened quietly.

“Camiola,” he said, when Esler had finished, “did we not tell you that this young man was not what he seemed?”

“It is all right, Nev. I knew that he is an English gentleman,” she answered steadily.

“Upon my word, young woman, you are a good actress —did you know this when we spoke to you this morning?” cried Bassett, half amused, half angry.

“Yes, I knew. I felt sure that everything would have to come out, as Neville had found the letter; but I wanted you to see for yourself what he had done for me before hearing what he had to say. I knew he could clear himself.”

“Who are you, Mr. Masquerader?” asked Bassett impatiently, “if I may venture to put the question?”

“I am Eric Westonhaugh,” replied the young man. “My mother was sister to the present Graf von Orenfels, and Frau Esler is her foster sister. You will ask why I concealed my name? There are several reasons. One—the first—is that my mother had resented, so seriously, the attitude of her family with regard to her own marriage to my father—the vicar of a small English parish—that she never allowed it to be known that she visited this

place. We did, however, visit Orenfels, as I have already told Miss France. We came incognito, and were always supposed to be relatives of the Eslers. This fact made the place an ideal spot in which to hide when I decided, in view of my sister's shattered health and nerves, to take her out of her husband's reach until her child was born. You may guess that, all having been so admirably planned and my sister recovering her health and spirits marvellously in this fine air, we mere much taken aback at the unwelcome news that the castle was let for the summer. Frau Esler and I made light of it to Mrs. Cooper, however. We moved her into a—a part of the house which we thought could not be wanted." For a moment he seemed confused, and shot a glance at Camiola under his lids. She turned crimson. "Miss France," he went on, recovering himself, "soon gained the hearts of all, even of my aunt. I began to think that I would own up and tell her everything. I hated playing a part before her, and I did not like the idea that anything should be going on here of which she knew nothing. Then Mr. Bassett and Mr. Thurlow arrived from England, and on the very first evening of their stay, while waiting at table, I heard Mr. Thurlow say that he was Mr. Cooper's legal representative. You will easily see that after that my lips were sealed. All precautions for secrecy had to be redoubled. We said nothing of it to my sister, whose health from day to day was our one pre-occupation. I determined, however, that as soon as practicable after the child was born, I must send her away. The bustle of the party seemed to give me the chance I needed of accomplishing the removal unsuspected; and now there is no longer any reason why I should make a mystery of the affair."

Arnold Bassett had allowed his pipe to go out in the astonishment of this recital. "Well," he remarked, with a glance of decided friendliness towards the young man,

"Camiola's fancy for taking the castle was certainly a bit of cruelly hard luck for you!"

Eric looked at Camiola. His eye met hers. "Yes," he said. That was all; but his whole heart seemed to escape in the word.

"And I even invaded the garrets," she said, laughingly, nervously, speaking for the sake of saying something. "Poor Frau Esler! How rude she was! How she hated me! How faithful she has been! . . . And we were playing and picnicking and making demands upon your time, when all this was going on! We ought to beg your pardon, I think!"

Neville rose. "I understand that you consider your sister to have serious grounds for dissatisfaction against her husband?" he asked.

Esler looked grim. "That is so," he replied shortly.

"You and I must have a serious business talk later on," suggested Neville.

Esler made a restless movement, as of one caged. "I am leaving the castle this evening," he said. He dared not look up as he said it.

Neville took out a pocket-book. "Then had I better make a note here and now," he said, "of the—er—terms upon which I think you said Mrs. Cooper might be induced to consider the idea of reconciliation?"

Eric hesitated, then sat down. "If you will be so kind," he murmured.

"Come, Camiola, we are *de trop*," observed Bassett, and, putting his arm within that of the girl, he drew her away.

The peace of the afternoon brooded over the kitchen at Orenfels.

It was a big, bare room, beautifully clean and tidy, and the kitchen-maid, in her picturesque costume, was dishing

up tea-cakes upon plates which stood ready upon the snowy boards of the scrubbed table.

In the window, at a smaller table, sat Bertha Esler, deep in talk with old Johanna, the witch-woman from the Watch Tower.

They were talking in German, that the girl at the table might not understand them; and as Camiola entered she could not help hearing the high-pitched, cracked voice of the old woman, saying:

“Thou art wrong! Fate is stronger than she!”

Bertha, as the door opened, sprang to her feet; and as her eyes fell upon Camiola her whole face hardened. Johanna, however, was very differently affected. She gave a low chuckle—“What did I tell thee?”—and, leaning her withered chin on her hand, watched keenly and silently.

Camiola, using the few words of Roumanian which she had picked up, bade the girl run away; and when she had left the room she went timidly up to Frau Esler, standing before her more in the attitude of a repentant child than of the mistress of the castle.

“Oh, Frau Esler, I have come to tell you—to try and tell you—how sorry I am.” . . . So far she got, and her voice broke.

“What is this?” said Bertha uncertainly, her fierce eyes glooming upon the lowered head and downcast eyes.

“If I had only known,” faltered Camiola; “but I did not know until last night—until Eric told me. I want you to forgive me for all the anxiety, all the trouble I have given.” . . . And again her voice failed, and she began to sob. Then she made a step forward, her hands were lifted impulsively, and Bertha, like a woman acting without her own volition, took her in her arms. The soft dark head drooped upon the housekeeper’s ample bosom, and the elder woman muttered gruffly but not harshly:

"Hush, hush! Weep not! How could you know? He always said you did not know."

Camiola was now crying heartily. "Of course I didn't. How could I? Oh, you might have told me! You did not believe in me; you thought I was not to be trusted. . . . But now—now that I know at last—there is only one thing to be done. I have come to you because I dare not go to him. I have a message—a message for you to give him from me. He must send for Clare! He must tell her to come back! Where should she be but in her brother's castle? For he is the heir, is he not? I am only an interloper, and I—I simply can't bear the thought that I have driven them out!"

For a minute there was no sound in the kitchen but that of the two women's sobbing. Old Johanna sat motionless, her eyes glazed like one who sees visions, a smile of uttermost satisfaction upon her twisted old mouth.

"She says it, Bertha, she says it," muttered she; "and as she says, so must it be done in future in the Castle of Yndaia."

As she spoke the door behind them opened, closed abruptly. Camiola lifted her tear-stained face, and there stood Esler, his face flushed, his eyes angry.

"Bertha, what are you doing?" he cried sharply, but Frau Esler only folded her arms more firmly round the girl, and said:

"She says I am to tell thee, hot-head, to go and fetch thy sister back again."

His face changed from confusion to a joy so intense that it lit up his eyes as though some one had touched a switch. Then in an instant he was outwardly calm.

"Our lady is heavenly kind," he said in his usual gentle, deferential manner, coming forward so that he could lay down the bag he carried upon the kitchen table.

"Well, then, what answer do you make to her kindness?" challenged the Frau.

"The only possible answer—that I have already accepted too much of it, and dare not incur further debt."

He spoke in a voice of finality, and, turning abruptly, went up to old Johanna, who sat motionless by the table in the window, one gnarled hand resting on the wood, the other upon her knee. With eyes and ears wide open, she was drinking in every word.

"Why, mother," he said kindly, "hast thou come up on thy feet all this way to bid me God-speed?"

"Nay, Eric the Dragon-slayer," answered she slowly, "but to bid thee stay."

Camiola, her tears checked, raised herself from Frau Esler's supporting arms, and listened, breathless. She saw Eric start a little but recover himself.

"I must go, mother," he replied kindly. "I have my living to get, out in the hard world."

"Thy place is here," she answered composedly, "for in thee all the prophecy of Ephrosine is fulfilled. The blood of the Vajda-Maros has mixed with alien blood, and he who should restore his line is fair and brave, and hath slain the dragon. As for her"—the old woman raised that shaking hand and pointed to Camiola—"the first night that ever she laid her head upon the pillow at the Blaue Vögel, I whispered a dream into her ear, a dream of the Black Dragon, to waken her interest and hold her here among us. She stayed! I whispered another later on—a dream of the secret rooms—so that she might find out all. Ask her if she took the dreams I gave her from mine hand?"

Camiola answered clearly: "Yes, mother, I had them both. In the first dream was the dragon, in the second was the Herr Westonhaugh himself." She flushed brightly as she said it, but she held her head high.

“Good! Good!” cried the old woman, lifting both hands in great excitement. “She accepts her fate, boy! All is thine!”

Camiola had crept a little nearer; as he turned abruptly from the old woman’s eagerness, he saw her, a few paces from him.

“Surely, Herr Westonhaugh,” said she, very sweetly, in English, “there is no need to ‘hold out’ any longer now?”

“You know,” he said, in the same tongue, chokingly, “that there is far more need than ever there was before. Please go. The kitchen is no place for you.”

“You—you must say good-bye to me first,” faltered she, shaping her words with difficulty. She came a step nearer.

He put his hands behind him and backed a little away from her.

“Miss France,” said he, “I should like you to know that I wouldn’t give in if you were to offer me the crown of England.”

“Isn’t there,” she queried, “something that might perhaps tempt you *more* than the crown of England?”

He had backed until he reached the big table, and so could not retreat farther. He stood before it, gripping its edge behind him with his hands. She came on, nearer, nearer. Her two hands were held out pleadingly.

“I won’t! I won’t!” said Eric. “You are behaving very badly, you are pushing me into a corner! Besides, it can’t be true! Had you really a dream about the garret rooms? Did I show them to you?”

“Yes, yes! You did!”

“And were you”—he leaned forward in his eagerness—“were you wearing the old red brocade out of the chest upstairs?”

"Oh, but how did you know? How could you possibly know?"

"Because I dreamed it, too! Johanna is a witch right enough, whatever Ephrosine may have been! She ought to be burnt in the Market Square!"

"Eric, the coats of nettles are all made! There is no need for the Princess to keep silent any more!"

"Camiola, that was a princess and not a prince! A girl and not a man! It is all right when the king marries the beggar maid. When the other thing happens, you know what they call the man."

"Eric, you might be a little sorry for me. I decided to marry Otho, because I thought the castle was his. Now it turns out to be yours, so I—I—naturally I have changed my mind."

She managed to say it, but she was crimson, and her eyes were downcast.

He drew in his breath sharply, and muttered, "You minx! Oh, you minx! I tell you I won't, I won't, I won't!"

"You mean it? It is your last word?"

"It is."

"Then good-bye. I leave the castle to-morrow." She turned away.

"Frau Esler," said she in German, "the young Herr does not wish me to remain longer in his castle. It is all over. I must go. I have no right here. Farewell."

She turned away. He watched her as she went to the door, across the big room, without once turning back. From her post at the window Johanna watched her, too. She fumbled at the latch, because her eyes were dim with tears, but she opened the door at last, went out, closed it. As the sound reverberated through the old place, Eric darted after her.

Just outside the passage was dark and narrow. He

shut himself out, groped, found her, snatched her, held her, crying tenderly. "Oh, you cruel, cruel woman! Tyrant! Make a man your slave, and then trample on him! I tell you I can't, can't do it! How do you suppose I can face that Bassett? He will say it has been a put-up job from the first—that I have plotted and planned to trap you and your money! There! I love you! But you knew that! I am mad for you! But you knew that! Now you have heard me say it, perhaps you will let me go, let me creep away with my damaged self-respect and hide myself, treasuring the scanty remains of my honour on board some merchant tramp!"

But Camiola locked one arm about his strong young neck, and, like the tyrant he called her, declined to let him go.

There, in the darkness of the old passage, they clung together, and his strength grew as water in the new tide of sweetness which flooded him.

"Camiola, this is the end!"

"Eric, this is the beginning. I was never alive until this moment."

"Were you not? Was it in a moment of unconsciousness that you went up into my room, took my one treasure, my poor little sketch, and tore it to bits? You are a fury, and I should never manage you, I am sure."

"But even in the cave—in my abject terror—I did what you told me?"

"Then do as I tell you now. Let me go!"

"Am I holding you? I was under the impression that it was you who had me fast!"

"Because it is for the last time!"

"Because it is for the first time. . . . Ah! . . . When did you begin to love me, Eric?"

"The first day you came to look over the castle. I went out upon the terrace after lunch, and you had fallen asleep

on the grass. I stood there and said to myself, 'There is the girl, the one girl. I see now what it is that I have given up, to save Clare.' Oh, Camiola, what I felt when you presented me with that tip! . . . And all that day and all that night I thought of you, and said to myself, 'I shall never see her again.' And the very next morning but one I walked into the hall, and you sat there, on the table, and Otho was beside you."

"Yes, yes; go on!"

"That was the end, and this is the end of the end. We are saying good-bye, you and I."

"I am saying good-bye to my peasant guide-boy. I am giving greeting to the overlord of the Yndaia."

In the kitchen the two women, aunt and niece, stood gazing upon one another.

There was a long silence. Old Johanna still sat with wide eyes, as one in a trance. Bertha stared upon her, and upon the sphinx-like smile she wore.

"How didst thou know?" she inquired in a low voice, "that she was the one—the destined one? Thou sayest that thou sentest her a dream upon the very first night. How couldst thou tell?"

"Behold," was the dreamy answer, "it is written, all of it, in the prophecy of Ephrosine, in the last words thereof: 'And she, the bride of the Dragon-slayer, who shall restore the ancient line, she shall come from a far country, and shall enter into the gate of the city, riding in a carriage which hath no horses.' This I saw with mine eyes, and knew that the days were fulfilled."

CHAPTER XXXI

COMING HOME

FROM end to end of the Ildenthal the news went forth of the slaying of the dragon.

From one newspaper to another flashed the announcement of the discovery of the answer to the riddle which had puzzled so many for so long.

The party at Orenfels awoke, in quite a few days' time, to find an army of photographers camped round about their fortress, and the railway bringing in train-loads of trippers every day.

It soon became evident that Ildestadt would be from henceforward the centre of a tourist industry which must result in the reaping of a golden harvest for the owner of the land round about the castle.

Otho took the discovery of his cousin's existence with his characteristic good humour. It was not possible for him to be very much cast down when Betty was his promised wife. In fact, he by no means shared Camiola's enthusiasm for the old castle, and was glad to be free of the responsibility of it.

Somewhat to Camiola's amusement the Thurlow parents were much pleased at this engagement. A title was a thing which appealed strongly to Mrs. Thurlow; and although Otho would not himself be *Graf von Orenfels*, still that imposing title was in the family.

The poor old *Graf*, who had borne poverty, and the final ruin which overtook him with the failure of the *Kurhaus*, with such patience, now proved too feeble to

bear the sudden turn of the tide. His health gave way, and he was thankful to have so competent and devoted a nephew as Eric to direct his affairs and tell him what to do and how to act.

Before Camiola and Eric had been six weeks engaged, it was evident that the young lady was by no means marrying a beggar. Even if he never became rich, still he would not be dependent upon his wife's bounty; and, should the fame of Ildestadt as a health resort be established, he had the game in his own hands, since the hot springs, the land, the whole mountain side, belonged to his family, every inch of it.

Clare and her babe were brought back to the castle with all speed; and the boy—Forbes's godson—became the centre of attraction to everybody.

Mr. Cooper was, as Eric had declared he would prove, the kind of bully who, if boldly faced, will cringe. He was really attached to his beautiful young wife, and perhaps hardly conscious of the effects upon her of his tyrannical unkindness. The news that he had a son and heir affected him profoundly. He wrote the humblest letters, and agreed without demur to the terms insisted upon by Eric. His wife, backed up by powerful friends, and the sister of the heir to a title, was a different person from Clare Westonhaugh, the penniless young governess whom he had thought to mould to his despotic will.

Camiola suggested that he should come out to Ildestadt and fetch his wife and son home. He accepted the invitation, spent a week at the castle, in company with the lively set of young people who were holiday-making there; and behaved so well that poor Clare confided to Eric that she feared it was too good to last.

“Well,” replied Camiola, as she kissed her good-bye, “you will have your remedy now. Wherever, on the surface of the habitable globe, Eric and I may be, you can

always come to us if Mr. Cooper is tiresome. He will be ashamed to drive you to that. He wants to stand well with us."

On the first day of the following June the Graf and Gräfin von Orenfels arrived at their castle to spend the summer.

The old Graf had died during the winter, and Eric was allowing his aunt and cousins to retain the Watch Tower, and making them a very comfortable allowance.

As the car containing the young couple swept through the gates of Idlestadt, the people crowding the Market Square raised a great cheer. The houses were wreathed with garlands, flags fluttered everywhere, and in the centre of the square rose a huge, gaily decked pole, round which was curled an awful scaly monster, representing the Black Dragon. That evening all the poor of the town were to be feasted at the invitation of the Graf and Gräfin, and nobody had been prepared for the demonstrations of welcome with which they had assembled to celebrate the home-coming of the two who had turned the sleepy old town into a brisk and thriving watering-place.

Reed was covered with blushes as he steered the car through the surging crowds, preceded by the town band, playing patriotic airs.

There was a grand luncheon at the Blaue Vögel, the old aunt, Cousin Anna and Cousin Linda having been invited, as also the General and Irmgard, soon to become Mrs. Neville Thurlow.

Major and Mrs. von Courland were also present, very proud of the young officer's rapid promotion, and beaming with the happiness of the newly married.

The talk turned chiefly upon the approaching wedding, which was to be celebrated with great pomp in the huge church, the whole Thurlow family being expected out in

a few days, to be the guests of Camiola and her husband.

After the meal a further surprise was in preparation.

The civic authorities, headed by the Hungarian Obergespan and the Saxon Comes, waited to present an illuminated address, and a fine piece of plate, in the shape of a great silver cup with the Orenfels dragon curled about its foot. The stem was delicately chased in imitation of a rocky wall, with a rope hanging down it—the whole design intended to commemorate the wild adventure by which the Graf and Gräfin had found out the dreadful truth and dispersed the gloom of mystery from the neighbourhood.

It was sunset before the young couple could escape from the gratitude and enthusiasm of their tenants.

They were consumed with impatience to reach their home, and as soon as it could be done without courtesy, Erwald, who, since the slaying of the Dragon had developed a wide and almost perpetual smile, mounted his young mistress upon Jacinth, and they set out for the castle, Eric on foot as he loved to be.

Outside the Kurhaus another little crowd—this time of summer visitors—waited to greet them, and to stare at the hero and heroine of such a romance. By Eric's advice Herr Neumann was renting the Kurhaus, at a very low rent for this first year, with a good manager under him.

When the Kurhaus was left behind, and they found themselves nearing home, the bride and bridegroom grew more silent.

The castle stood up hoary and grand in the sunlight. As they appeared round the bend of the road, the great gates rolled back, disclosing Frau Esler, Forbes, and a whole retinue of servants behind them.

A general air of prosperity clothed everything, though so skilfully had the work of repair and restoration been accomplished, that one could not have pointed to anything,

and said: "This is new," or, "This is not in keeping."

The roses were just bursting into their first bloom, and out in the meadow where first Camiola saw Eric making hay, the grass was long and starred with alpine flowers.

"How unwilling you were to come and show me over the house!" laughed Camiola, turning to her husband with a chuckle.

"That I was! Nobody ever came, and I knew that Clare was strolling in the garden, and would hate to be caught!"

"And I thought you were angry at having to leave Rahula's sweet society!"

"Poor Rahula! She was all right! It was Lise Vorst who was the trouble! She was always under my feet! Did you see Marie's face to-day as we drove into the town?"

They had no time for more reminiscence, since they were being greeted by their household.

Within there were many changes. During the winter they had ransacked all kinds of places to find things which would be "just right" for their castle. The result was charming, it surpassed even Camiola's expectations.

They had to go over the whole domain, escorted by the eager Frau Esler. Then they had to dress and sit down in state to a banquet, when they felt as if all they wanted was to be left together to think over the wonder of their happiness.

At last dessert was finished, and they were free to wander forth, to descend the steps, to sit upon the marble bench beside the bowling green. Twilight was falling, the sky was the colour of a slice of melon, green melting to apricot. The air was heavy with incense of roses, the big chafers boomed as they drifted through the balmy atmosphere.

"How wonderful!" sighed Camiola.

"Perhaps it would be a good moment to make a confession," murmured Eric, holding her close.

"Confess away."

"I kissed you."

"A good many times, silly!"

"Ah, but once, before I had any right to!"

"When was that?"

"It was here."

"Here!"

"The first day. You were fast asleep on the grass. Miss Purdon was out of sight. I thought I should never see you again, and you were the girl of my dreams. I said, 'It can't hurt her, she will never know.' "

"Well, upon my word! On my face?"

"No. I hadn't quite the impudence for that. I knelt down and kissed your arm, a little above the wrist—just here."

"I suppose that made me yours."

"Johanna came up the hill that night. She was the only soul, except Bertha, who knew who Clare and I were. She was sitting in the kitchen when I went in, and she said calmly:

"This day you have kissed your wife that will be."

"Eric, she is a witch."

"We call it clairvoyance now," he said, "and telepathy."

"I call it something else," she whispered, and added, laughing, "love at first sight."

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